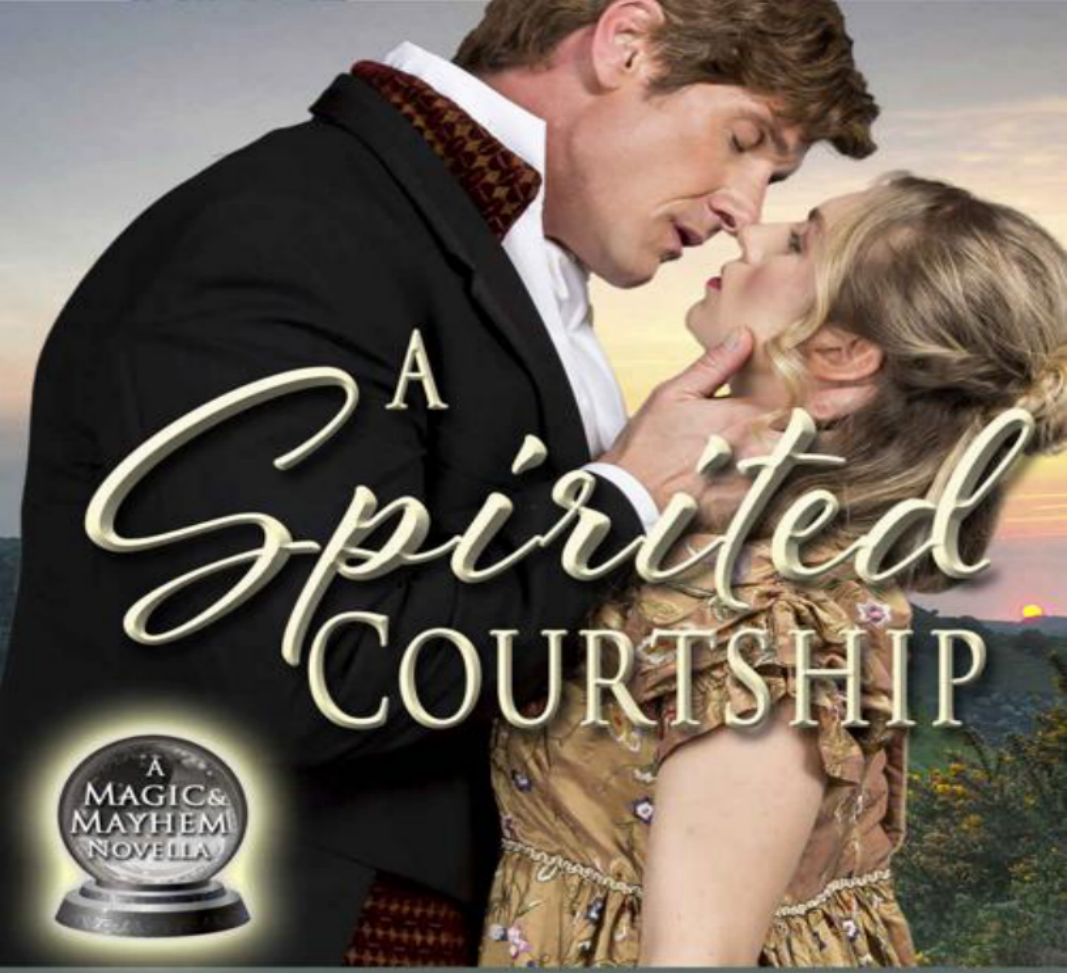


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JANE CHARLES

A Spirited Courtship

(Magic & Mayhem)

Jane Charles

Night Shift Publishing

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Historical Romances by Jane Charles
Contemporary Romances by Jane Charles
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Prologue

May, 1812, London

MISS DIANA VAIL pinched her cheeks to bring more color, smoothed the few wrinkles from her lilac gown and did a turn before the mirror to make certain all was in place before she exited the retiring room. With each step, she became giddier for she was to meet James Bryant, the Earl of Somerton, in the gardens behind the Hearne grand ballroom.

"James," she sighed to herself. She called him James and he called her Diana, though never in front of others, as it simply wasn't done. Soon, that wouldn't matter, or at least she hoped, as he'd been courting her nearly all Season. It wasn't yet an official courtship, but only because her half-brother, Viscount Lynwood, was not in London to grant permission. Regardless, James may not have said the words but after the kisses and caresses they'd shared the night before in Vauxhall, she was confident a betrothal was in her future.

To think Diana had dreaded this Season. She was four and twenty, no longer fresh from the schoolroom and feared she might eventually land on the shelf. Instead, she'd met James, he'd courted her, and Diana had fallen in love, ready to secretly meet him.

"What do you think Somerton is about?"

Diana paused just outside the door leading to the card room.

"Since I've known him, he's vowed that 'if Noah could become a father at the age of five hundred, then I can surely wait to begin producing offspring until age forty'." The quote was said by several gentlemen, and in unison, as if they knew it by heart.

Diana stepped away from the entrance to keep from being seen, taking care that her shadow would not cast across the entrance so as to give her away. However, she remained close enough to hear what was being said.

"His mother is pressing him to marry and has been encouraging young women to make his acquaintance since the beginning of the Season," one gentleman said. "I assume Somerton simply picked Miss Vail to court so that the others, and his mother, would leave him be."

Diana grabbed the wall for support. What they were saying couldn't possibly be true.

"I'd wager that Somerton does not become betrothed until the time

he set for himself," someone else declared. "Does anyone wish to wager against me?"

Diana couldn't make out the mumblings, but it was clear that no one was willing to take the bet.

Was it true? Did James have no intention of asking for her hand? Was she simply someone to be used during the Season so he was not bothered by others?

"Though I will wager that he'll bed her mother before the Season is through."

Diana's mouth popped open. Not that she was shocked by her mother's reputation. It was well known that she enjoyed her lovers since becoming a widow, and it was quite embarrassing. However, Diana couldn't imagine that *James* would be one of those men. He was soon to be seven and twenty and her mother was five and forty, far too old to be taking lovers to her bed, especially ones that were young enough to be her son.

"Lady Lynwood does eye Somerton like a cat approaching a bowl of cream."

Heat scorched Diana's cheeks at their raucous laughter.

"I'm afraid the time for that wager has already passed," someone said. "Just the other day I heard Lady Lynwood telling my mother over tea that Somerton was the best lover she'd ever enjoyed."

This could not be! James had not bedded her mother! He couldn't have.

Darkness began to seep into her vision, but Diana forced it away.

"Perhaps Somerton isn't courting Miss Vail to discourage other misses," someone offered.

"What do you mean?" another asked.

"I saw the two exit the dark walk last night. By the loose curls and the smile upon Miss Vail's face, one must wonder if Somerton wanted to experience a younger version of the mother. And perhaps the daughter is more like the mother than any of us realized."

Mortification settled into Diana's bones.

The kisses and caresses she'd allowed last night came back to her in a flash. She'd allowed liberties that no miss should, but she'd believed his intentions honorable. Further, Diana had thought James was as much in love with her as she was with him, even if he hadn't spoken the words.

"Nothing more will come of their association once the Season comes to an end, as I heard Lady Somerton will never accept Miss Vail as a potential bride for her son, which makes one wonder what Somerton is truly about," someone else insisted. "Is it to discourage others? Or, to prove to his mother that she doesn't have control over his life? Or did he wish to learn if Miss Vail was as free with her

affections as her mother? Possibly all three?"

Others in the room laughed and Diana wanted to die of humiliation.

Had he just been toying with her affection? A slow seduction until he finally gained from her what he apparently had gotten from her mother? He had tried last night, but when he attempted to pull at her skirts, she'd stopped him.

Diana's stomach clenched and she put a hand over her mouth for fear that she'd toss up her accounts. Thank Heavens she had learned the truth before it was too late. However, she fully intended to give James…the Earl of Somerton, a seething set down before she removed him from her life.

Chapter 1

One Month Later –Castel Keyvnor, Cornwall

"THE FAIREST MAIDEN in all of Cornwall has returned."

Diana stopped as the image of a knight materialized before her. "Sir Orwen," she greeted the specter with little patience.

"Not simply Cornwall, but all of England." Sir Gilbert appeared beside the other knight, bowing deep, flourishing his hat, the red feather brushing the ground.

They were quite a spectacle in their long doublets. Sir Gilbert in blue and Sir Orwen in green, with slashed sleeves to reveal their white shirts beneath. Diana didn't know if the slits were from battling or if the doublets had been designed in such a manner, but she wasn't going to ask. Any questions only further encouraged the cavaliers.

"Please, go away." Diana pivoted on her heel to return home to Hollybrook Park.

"If only that we could," Sir Orwen assured her.

"To be rid of this place would be quite rewarding," Sir Gilbert added. "To be free of this land, this castle, of the binds that tether us to Earth, to be free to fly…" One arm rose as his other hand pressed against his breast. His voice rose in a dramatic flair that would have earned him a lead role on any London stage, if he were alive.

"Bugger it," Sir Orwen growled. "I find your attempt at melodramatic poetry nauseating and I'm certain Miss Vail does as well."

Sir Gilbert gasped and came forward, placing his cold hands over Diana's ears. "Such foul language in the presence of fair maiden's hearing? A shame upon you, Sir Orwen."

"Stop!" Diana ground out between clenched teeth as she tried to push Sir Gilbert away, though it did little good since her hands went right through his icy image. "I find you both equally annoying and unpleasant." She stomped away in hopes that they'd disappear.

"But wait," Sir Orwen called. "You've not yet found love, have you?"

She blew out a breath and let her head fall back. "No. I have not." Though, she thought she had, not that she'd admit such to those two.

Foolish is what she'd been. And it was unlikely she'd ever find love, as she had no intention of returning to London ever again. She

couldn't face such humiliation a second time. It was bad enough that she'd be attending the wedding festivities at Castle Keyvnor during the coming week. She hoped that none of the gentlemen who'd been saying such vile things at the Hearne ball had been invited. Though, in truth, as she did not know who they were, Diana decided to assume they would not be present.

"And as such, we can't leave you," Sir Gilbert insisted. "You are our quest. Our duty. We are bound to you."

He swept another deep bow and Diana rolled her eyes.

"We are pledged to you."

"We are not pledged." Sir Orwen slid an irritated glance to Sir Gilbert. "We are cursed, and she is the first hope we've had in decades of seeing it undone."

Cursed indeed! She was the one cursed by their presence. And why couldn't anyone else see them? Why only her?

The two had first appeared to Diana a sennight before she traveled to London for the Season. She'd hoped they'd be gone once she returned. Instead, they were waiting and appeared before her the day she returned from London, only a few weeks earlier. Since, she'd not been able to set foot on Keyvnor land without them appearing before her.

"There are a number of misses you could bind yourself to. In fact, a wedding is to be held at the castle." She gestured back toward Castle Keyvnor. "Pick one of the guests to bother. I'm certain you'll find another *fair maiden* among them."

Diana walked around the two medieval knights, knowing that once she crossed the border that separated Keyvnor land from Hollybrook Park, they'd not be able to follow. She'd avoid Keyvnor land completely if she could, but this road was the only one that led from her home to the village of Bocka Morrow. There were paths through the forest, and other means, but regardless of the route, it was impossible to avoid Keyvnor land unless she took a boat. And, if these two persisted in their irritation, Diana might take up sailing into the village just to avoid them.

"But it's you we must serve," Sir Orwen insisted. "You are the chosen one."

"No. I am not." Diana threw up her hands and walked away, unfortunately walking closer to the castle instead of away. "You simply chose me. Choose someone else."

"We've waited centuries for you. Please do not disappoint us now," Sir Gilbert begged.

Slowly she turned and tilted her head. "I thought it was decades?" If they were going to convince her that she was their destiny, then they really needed to tell the same story, beginning with how long

they'd waited for her—*the chosen one*.

"Centuries," Sir Orwen insisted. "I will admit there have been others. The most recent, however, was in 1765 and each time we've been given the opportunity, we've failed in the quest."

"However, we shall not fail *you*, dear maiden." Once again Sir Gilbert bowed deeply.

"I do not need your assistance. Good day." With those words she pushed through the two knights, trying not to shiver at the coldness of their beings and marched right over the border and onto land belonging to her brother's viscountcy—Hollybrook Park.

"Stuff and nonsense," Diana grumbled as she trudged down the road.

~

JAMES PULLED BACK on the reins of his steed and stared down the road. His heart hitched at the sight of Miss Diana Vail. He still didn't know what he'd done to earn Diana's scorn. It had been unexpected and had cut deep.

One moment he was waiting in the gardens behind the Hearne ballroom, listening to the strains of a waltz as the music drifted through the open windows and anticipating the moment that she would join him. He'd hoped to find a quiet corner where the two of them would not be disturbed. The next moment, she had stormed out of the ballroom, marched directly toward him, demanding to know if he was or was not a rakehell and simply toying with her affection with no intention of marrying. He'd been so shocked that he'd been robbed of words as his mind scrambled to determine why she would even make such an accusation, especially after the hours they'd spent together, and the evening before. His failure to utter even a single word of denial had apparently prompted Diana to raise her arm and slap him soundly across the face. He'd been so stunned he wasn't certain what to do. She then railed at him before she informed him that she wanted nothing more to do with him. And, in the few days that remained of the Season, she'd not be at home to him, nor had she attended any entertainments.

That was a month ago and James still didn't know what he'd done to incur her wrath.

"Is that Miss Vail?" Wesley Claxton, the Marquess of Epworth, asked as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"It is." Diana stomped down the road only to stop and turn, her arms flailing, as she appeared to be yelling, then stomped off again.

At least it wasn't only him that she directed her vexation, though James would love to be closer to see the fire in her emerald eyes.

Diana was the only reason he had decided to attend the wedding of Lady Gwyn Hambly to Lord Locryn Pendarvis. When James had left Keyvnor following last Christmas, he'd vowed never to return. However, knowing Diana lived on a neighboring estate changed everything.

She turned, marched away, only to once again halt and fist her hands on her hips as if she were scolding someone, then shook her head and waved a dismissive hand to what or whoever was behind her and marched off toward Hollybrook Park.

"Is she a bedlamite? She hadn't shown any signs of such an affliction in London."

"She isn't," James chuckled.

"Perhaps rehearsing for a play or entertainment?" Epworth's brow lifted in question.

"Not that either," James replied and turned his horse back toward Castle Keyvnor.

"What we just witnessed is not normal behavior. Miss Vail is clearly not in her right mind."

"On the contrary, Epworth, I'm quite certain Miss Vail is in possession of all her faculties." With the exception of when she had called him a reprobate before she had wished the pox on him. That had been uncalled for and she certainly had no cause to do so.

"Did you not witness what I just did? She was arguing with nobody, and quite animated as well."

James pulled the horse to a stop and looked to Epworth. "Have you not visited Castle Keyvnor before?"

"No. I've had no reason."

"You've heard rumors at least, have you not?"

"About ghosts?" Epworth laughed at the absurdity. "You can't possibly believe such nonsense."

"I very much believe," James assured him.

"You've encountered one?" Intrigue and distrust laced Epworth's tone.

"I was one of the few who did not experience an other-worldly encounter during my last visit," James assured him. "Unless you consider cold drafts that can envelope a body in one moment and be gone in the blink of an eye."

"That still doesn't explain what we just witnessed and the strange behavior of Miss Vail."

"Of course it does." James set his horse to a trot. "She was being pestered by a ghost."

At that he let the horse gallop, leaving Epworth behind. It was impossible to convince anyone of the strange happenings at Castle Keyvnor. It needed to be experienced and as Epworth would be

staying at the castle for the next sennight, he'd encounter the oddities himself and no longer question Diana's behavior.

He'd dearly like to know why the ghost was bothering her and why she was so irritated by its presence. Under normal circumstances, he'd ask but James was also quite certain Diana had no intention of ever speaking to him again, though he was still uncertain as to what he'd done wrong. One night, she was melting from his kisses and the next, telling James that she never wished to see him again.

Miss Vail was beautiful, passionate, stubborn and impatient. He desired her like he'd never desired another woman. However, she was also the one threat to the plans he'd made long ago. Thankfully, he had come to his senses before it was too late, though that hadn't occurred until she'd marched away from him at the Hearne ball.

After arriving at the stables, James dismounted, tossed the reins to one of the lads before he headed into the castle.

"Garrett Hillyard! You will do something about those children of yours. And you will do it today."

At the sound of his mother's voice coming from the library, James quickly changed direction and took the stairs to his chamber. His original destination had been the billiards room and a glass of brandy, but so long as his mother remained in the same wing of the castle, he was going to put distance between them. Though he did wonder what mischief his darling nieces had gotten up to this time.

James stepped into his chamber and paused, taking in the room. Yes, this was the one he'd been assigned and where he'd changed his clothing before he went for a ride with Epworth. His toiletries were on the dressing table and that was his trunk beside the armoire. What he didn't recognize was the beautiful woman lounging upon his bed. She really was lovely with her blonde tresses, only a shade darker than Diana's golden curls, though her clothing was odd, given she wore a blue gown with gold trim over a deep blue petticoat—a dress worn in a much earlier era. Was there to be a costume party this evening? An odd choice for a wedding party, but this was Cornwall and oddities were normal here most of the time.

The woman watched him with intensity, staring at him, but she wasn't smiling. Instead, she seemed a bit forlorn.

"I believe you've mistaken my room for yours," James said and opened his chamber door. He did not know her and the last thing he wanted or needed was to be caught in a compromising position with a woman he'd never met. He still had at least twelve years before he ended his bachelor state and wasn't about to have his plans disrupted by a stranger.

Her blue eyes widened. "You can see me?"

He glanced around, wondering if she spoke to someone else.

She sat forward. “You really see me?”

“Of course,” James answered. “However, this is *my* chamber. Should I call Mrs. Bray so that she might escort you to yours?”

Instead of embarrassment, the woman smiled brightly as she pulled herself from the bed.

“You really do see me!” she cried, then did a little twirl.

This was very odd, even for Cornwall, and James inched his way back toward the entrance.

“And we’re talking!” She laughed. “You’ve no idea how happy this makes me.”

“I’m glad you are pleased,” James answered slowly. Perhaps this odd woman was the real bedlamite.

“I’ve waited and I’d hoped, even prayed that it would happen. That’s why I’ve gone from chamber to chamber, only those assigned to a bachelor of course, in hopes that I might be noticed.”

She was visiting the chambers of bachelors! Did she wish to be ruined?

“It’s soon to be the anniversary and I’d hoped that this year everything would finally align, freeing me from this place.”

“What anniversary would that be?” James backed toward the corridor. If she were married then at least he wouldn’t be forced to marry her, but an irate husband might take issue with finding his wife in James’ chamber.

“Of my death,” she answered as if her response explained everything.

James could feel his jaw drop as he stared at the woman. She didn’t appear to be a ghost, but whole, though very pale.

“It’s been three hundred years, or it will be with the summer solstice, and I’d begun to give up hope that I’d ever be free of this place after so many failures.”

“You’re a ghost.” Maybe she’d laugh and tell him this was a prank. James hoped that was the case.

“Of course.” She smiled. “And you, dear sir, are going to help me gain my freedom.”

When he’d not encountered any ghosts on his prior visit, James assumed he was immune somehow. Apparently, that was not the case. “How exactly am I going to help free you?”

“By falling in love.”

He gaped at her, then nearly laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation. The last thing he had any intention of doing was falling in love. He absolutely refused to do so until his thirty-ninth birthday.

“I must hasten to make plans and meet the misses so that I can pick the perfect one for you.” Then she was gone, disappearing into thin air and leaving James very much alone.

Chapter 2

BY THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, James had convinced himself that he'd imagined the lady in his chamber. Or she'd decided to plague another bachelor.

"Uncle James!" his nieces cried as they rushed forward, skipping around the other guests also enjoying the mild weather in the vibrant gardens behind the castle.

The two dark haired little girls were the only two females he might ever trust. He adored them completely and they were his favorite partners in mischief.

James sank down, balancing on the balls of his feet so that he'd be at their eye level. "I have a surprise, but you mustn't tell your father or grandmother," he whispered to the girls as he pulled two small bags from inside his coat and handed them over.

The two peeked inside and their faces brightened, and in unison exclaimed, "Lemon drops."

"Shhh," he quieted them. Their father, the Duke of Markham, was near and would not appreciate his daughters being given a treat, especially after they'd been punished for poor behavior the day before. In fact, Markham had warned him *not* to give his daughters any treats. Fortunately for his nieces, James rarely obeyed his older brother. Just because Markham's father had been a duke and James' was an earl, or the fact that Markham was older, didn't give him leave to order James about, which made it doubly enjoyable to present his nieces with the lemon drops.

"Thank you, Uncle James." Lucy threw her arms about his neck, nearly knocking James on his arse.

"Yes, thank you, and we shan't say a word," Madeline giggled. "Especially not to Grandmother."

"Definitely not to Grandmother," he agreed. "She doesn't want any of us to have fun *or treats*." He winked. "Now run off and don't get caught eating those or your Grandmother will have my head."

"They are quite delightful," the ghostly woman said as James stood. "However, you shan't find love playing with children."

The apparition hadn't been his imagination after all. However, this time James ignored her, as there were too many people present and he didn't want anyone thinking he was a bedlamite like Epworth had opined of Miss Vail the day before.

“I know you can hear me. Why don’t you say anything?”

Instead of speaking, James slid a warning glance in her direction then spread out his hand to acknowledge everyone near him.

“Oh, very well.” She blew out. “Simply listen then.”

It wasn’t as if he had a choice, though he could ignore everything she said.

“I’ve searched the castle and learned what I can of the guests.” She frowned. “This isn’t going to be easy.”

No. It was going to be impossible.

“All I can hope is that more guests will arrive and there will be a miss better suited for you.”

She didn’t even know him. How could this ghost have any idea who would suit James best?

“However—” she brightened. “—we shall make do if these are our only options.”

Make do? When it came time for him to marry, love or no, James would not simply *make do*.

“I will see you wedded,” the ghost proclaimed brightly.

“I’d rather be bedded,” James muttered under his breath as Miss Diana Vail stepped into the gardens.

“I’m certain you would since, apparently, men haven’t changed in three centuries.” She frowned. “Even though I’ve not experienced such an activity, I can’t imagine what the fuss is about.”

At that, James focused on the apparition. Had she died a virgin? If so, that was the most tragic thing he’d ever heard.

“Now, let’s take a walk and I’ll lead you to who I think is your best chance of finding love.”

The ghost slipped a hand about his forearm even though he’d not offered it. A chill rushed through him and caused James to shudder.

“So sorry. I forget sometimes.” She withdrew from him, started forward and then stopped. “Who is that lovely creature?” The ghost pointed to Diana.

Again, James shot her a look. He was not going to verbally answer the entity when there were so many around who could hear.

“She’s quite lovely.” The ghost glanced at James, then back to Diana. “Yes, she will do nicely.”

The last person he needed to be matched with was Diana. She may have been the reason he’d attended the wedding, but it was to find out what he’d done wrong so he could finally put her from his mind. He was *not* here to attempt another courtship. So, instead of following the specter, James turned on his heel and headed for the back of the garden, then onto the path within the shadows of the trees where he could be alone. He’d have his discussion with Diana, but when he was ready, and on his terms. And no ghost was going to manipulate a

match between them.

"You are not going to find love if you don't talk to women," the ghost informed as she followed.

"You are wasting your time, Miss…."

"Lady Isolda," she offered.

"Lady Isolda," he acknowledged. "My heart already belongs to Ladies Madeline and Lucy."

The ghost brightened. "Please, point them out and I'll see what I can do to facilitate a love match."

"My nieces," he clarified. "They already hold my heart and there is no room for any other lady."

"While I admire your affection for the children, being a favored uncle will not lead to love for you."

"On the contrary, they love me very much."

"Why are gentlemen so impossible?" Lady Isolda pouted as she settled on a bench.

James crossed his arms over his chest, hoping that she'd finally give up on him and find someone else to bother. "It's in our nature, I suppose."

"Yes, well, if it's the last thing I do, I will see you loved by an age-appropriate miss in need of a husband."

"Last thing you do?" He laughed. "Aren't you already dead?"

"Yes, well," she picked at her skirt. "The last thing I'll do while bound to this earth." Lady Isolda stood and fisted her hands on her hips. "Do not make this difficult for me or I will make life very unpleasant for you."

~

DIANA FEARED Somerton would be present since he was a relation to the bride, but she'd also hoped that he couldn't be bothered enough to pull himself from London. Unfortunately, he was the first gentleman she'd noticed when she stepped into the gardens behind Castle Keyvnor.

Why was he standing alone, and why did he appear irritated?

Their eyes met, and a moment later he turned, crossed to the opposite side of the garden and exited onto the wooden path as if he couldn't get away from her quickly enough.

Diana ignored the stab to her heart and reminded herself that she should be thankful that he didn't wish to have anything to do with her, as she certainly had no intention of speaking with the likes of him.

"This is a disappointment," her sister Miranda whined.

It was a lovely day, the Keyvnor gardens were in bloom and there

were several acquaintances from London present. “What is disappointing?”

“I’d hoped to see at least one ghost, but they are absent.”

Miranda had had a fascination with ghosts since she was a child. She’d even gone so far to insist that one lived in the attics of Hollybrook Park. Miranda hadn’t mentioned the Captain in years so Diana assumed she’d gotten over her imagination, yet it didn’t keep her from looking for ghosts elsewhere, including in the oldest homes in London during balls, and anytime they were even near Castle Keyvnor. In fact, every time they had reason to be on Keyvnor land, Miranda intentionally dawdled and believed if she remained long enough, a ghost would finally make an appearance to her.

“Though, I do believe that ghosts can wait.” A small smile pulled at Miranda’s lips as she nodded toward two gentlemen who stood in discussion. One just happened to be the Marquess of Epworth. Miranda had set her cap on Epworth during her first Season, but as far as Diana knew, only a friendship had developed over the past few years. Even Society had commented on their close friendship when they’d realized that the two were not a love match because they were seen in each other’s company so often.

“Why did Adam make us come here?” her sister, Cordelia complained quietly. “He knows I don’t like partaking in polite conversation.”

Adam was their older half-brother, Viscount Lynwood, as well as their guardian, and he knew Cordelia would rather be home reading. And, when stuck in conversation, she much preferred it involved the sciences or history, or anything really, so long as neither fashion nor weather was mentioned. Gentlemen rarely participated in such discussions with her, or any female to Diana’s knowledge, which Cordelia found quite vexing and would proclaim to anyone who listened that her mind was not made of fluff.

“I find it to be a rather delightful gathering,” Adriana announced as she glanced about. Adriana was the youngest of the sisters and had recently turned eighteen.

“You find everything delightful,” Cordelia grumbled. “Once you’ve suffered through a Season, no doubt your opinion shall change.”

“A word my lady?” Sir Orwen appeared before Diana and it was all she could do not to scream in frustration—at her sisters and at the ghosts. When the knights hadn’t appeared before her when she crossed onto Keyvnor land, she’d hoped that they’d finally given up.

“Miss Vail you are quite fetching in the pale-blue gown.” Sir Gilbert materialized before her. “The way the light reflects off your sun-kissed hair is quite brilliant with the way the golds shimmer within your curls. And your face, such beauty for my old, tired eyes.

There is not another in all the land to match your beauty." Sir Gilbert bowed deeply.

He bowed so often Diana had to wonder if he'd done the same when he was still alive, and if so, why hadn't he developed a permanent curve to his spine.

However, despite the two being in front of her, Diana did not acknowledge them since nobody seemed to notice their presence. Certainly not Miranda, who was staring right through Sir Orwen.

Why couldn't these two bother Miranda? She'd welcome the interference in her life.

"This is the perfect opportunity to find your match," Sir Orwen said.

"Yes, yes," Sir Gilbert agreed. "I've not seen so many bachelors in one place since Christmas. Which one do you fancy? Who calls to your heart?"

They needed to cease, but Diana couldn't tell them so while surrounded by the other guests of Castle Keyvnor. "Excuse me," she said to her sisters. "I think I shall take a stroll."

"This way," Sir Orwen gestured to a path on the far side of the garden. It was the very one Somerton had taken, and she wasn't going to risk coming across *him*.

"Miss Vail?" Sir Gilbert's brow lifted in question.

It was then that Somerton reemerged and made his way to where Mr. Oliver Dallimore and Lord Epworth stood in discussion. Diana skirted further away from the trio and then allowed the knights to escort her to the path. Once she was out of sight of the guests, Diana stopped.

"Not here," Sir Orwen ordered. "Anyone could come upon us."

She blew out a sigh and marched on, following them down an overgrown path that appeared not to have been used in several years and until they came to a small clearing basked in sunlight with an array of wildflowers growing in a haphazard fashion. Many vined around an old brick well. There was even a broken, wooden bucket on the ledge. Such a delightful place hidden away.

"Have you decided on a bachelor?" Sir Orwen demanded.

She gaped at him. "No! And I have no intention of doing so." Besides, she'd just arrived and had no idea which bachelors were present, other than Somerton, Dallimore and Epworth, none of which would do.

"Luckily for you, we've found him." Sir Gilbert grinned. "A fine gentleman. Finer than most and the ladies think him quite handsome. Oh, and titled. No fair maiden can resist a titled gentleman who is both young and fine of form."

"I do not need your assistance, nor do I want it. Please. Leave. Me.

Alone," she nearly yelled.

At those words, the two disappeared.

"Thank goodness," she muttered. Diana stepped to return down the path that had brought her here, except it was gone. Foliage from all directions surrounded her. Disoriented, Diana turned, searching for the break in the bushes and plants to reveal the trail, but there was no evidence that there had ever been one. She then glanced up to the sky and sun to determine which direction was east and west. Unfortunately, the sun was not cooperating as it was directly above her.

Diana straightened and scanned the area once again. Where was that blasted path? The two ghosts certainly didn't possess any magical powers to make it disappear. Unless…She stared closer at a bush that seemed to move, yet there was no breeze. "Pixies!"

In all directions, the foliage came alive as if wind danced beneath the leaves, then settled.

Since when did pixies assist ghosts, or were they simply taunting her? And how long before they'd reveal the path again?

Diana stared back up at the sky. Eventually the sun would shift, and she'd know what direction she must take back to the castle even if there was no path to guide her.

Chapter 3

AFTER JAMES LEFT Lady Isolda behind, he returned to the gardens, and made every effort not to look in Diana's direction as he approached Dallimore and Epworth, who were discussing shipping or something to do with the coast. It didn't really matter, James just needed to focus on anything that didn't involve love or Diana.

"You must come, immediately," Lady Isolda insisted as she materialized before him.

Why didn't Dallimore or Epworth see her? She was standing right in front of them. Instead, the two continued as if nothing were amiss.

"It's urgent."

There was nothing urgent about finding love.

"It's your nieces," Lady Isolda hissed.

That got James' attention. "Excuse me," he muttered before he stepped away from his friends and found a place where he could speak to the ghost in private. "What of my nieces?" he demanded.

"I fear they may be in danger."

A chill ran up his spine. As much as James loved and adored Madeline and Lucy, he was fully aware of their penchant for finding trouble. "Where? How?"

"This way."

James followed the apparition without question. If his nieces were in danger, he had to save them.

"There is an old wishing well. It's always been an attraction for the children. Unfortunately, it's crumbling, and I fear they may fall in."

"Where is it?" he demanded as she veered off the well-worn path and onto one that hadn't appeared to be used in quite some time.

"It's right through there." She pointed up ahead.

James hurried past the ghost. "Madeline! Lucy! Where are you?"

He pushed bushes and shrubberies out of his way, yelling his nieces' names until he came to the small clearing with the crumbling well. However, it was Diana he discovered instead. "Where are my nieces?"

She blinked and straightened. "I've not seen them, Lord Somerton."

Her tone was crisp and cool, and so blasted formal.

"Are you certain that they aren't here?" He rushed forward and braced his hands on the crumbling bricks of the well, then leaned over the edge. "Madeline! Lucy!" he called, but there was no answer.

“There have been no children here, Lord Somerton,” Diana said again.

“Blast it all.” His heart pounded even faster as he did a full turn. “She said they were here and in danger.” He pushed his fingers through his hair before he started to search among the foliage. “Are you certain Madeline and Lucy haven’t been here?” he demanded.

“I’ve been here for a short time, but I’ve not seen the girls or anyone else.”

Of course she wouldn’t have seen Lady Isolda.

“You must calm down.”

“Calm down?” he yelled. “My nieces could be in danger.”

Just as he said the words, a cold hand settled upon his shoulder.

“I’ve found them,” Lady Isolda whispered in his ear. “They wandered in another direction. I apologize for upsetting you, but they are quite safe.”

James blew out a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose as his pulse slowed back to normal. Blowing out a breath, he settled against the well. The bricks shifted beneath him, crumbling and in an instant, he was falling backwards. *Blast it all.* He scrambled to right himself, unable to find purchase.

“James!” Diana cried and grabbed onto his hand, pulling him back and saving him from tumbling into the well.

Once he gained his feet and caught his breath again, James looked down into Diana’s emerald eyes. The very eyes he’d fallen so hard for just a few months ago. They weren’t nearly as hard and cold as they’d been in London. “Thank you.”

Diana jerked her hands away from his. “Lord Somerton, who told you the girls were here?”

“I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” Lady Isolda whispered before she vanished.

Had Lady Isolda intentionally lied to him to get him here? She had pointed Diana out to him earlier and if she’d used his nieces to get him to do her bidding, Lady Isolda would wish that she was…What? She was *already* dead so there wasn’t much he could do to her, except refuse to fall in love.

“Lord Somerton?” Diana asked with concern.

James shook his head. “You’ll think me mad.” Though Diana might not be shocked because James *was* fairly certain that she’d been arguing with a ghost the day before.

“Perhaps. But tell me anyway,” she urged.

“A ghost,” he finally ground out. “A *ghost* told me that the girls had come to this wishing well and that they could fall in.”

Diana gasped and put a hand over her heart. “No wonder you are in such a state.”

“Before I nearly fell into the well, she’d told me that she’d been mistaken and that they are quite fine.”

~

“DID we not tell you that he was handsome, young, titled and of fine form?” Sir Gilbert appeared beside Diana.

Somerton was who her irritating knights had chosen for her? Diana nearly snorted at the thought. Somerton certainly would *not* fall in love with her. He hadn’t before and was unlikely to do so now. All he had wanted…well, she wasn’t going to think on that right now and was grateful that she’d not succumbed to his practiced seduction.

“At least *your* ghost is helpful,” Diana ground out. “I shall leave you to recover from your fright.”

Somerton tilted his head and studied her. “What spirit plagues you, Diana?”

Her name on his lips still warmed her to the core, but she’d not succumb to desire again. “You do not have leave to address me as such.”

Somerton arched a brow. “You’ve already given me leave. Just as you called me James.”

“Yes, well, we are no longer in London.” She grabbed her skirts and twirled away from him. “Besides, the association we once shared ended some time ago.” Though truthfully, a month wasn’t all that long and certainly not long enough for her heart to heal.

Before her, the path from which Somerton had emerged remained open, unlike the one she’d taken, and she started toward it.

“Why?”

Did he honestly just ask her such a question?

“Why is our association over? What did I do that offended you so terribly?”

Diana slowly turned. “You know very well.”

“No, I don’t.” He held out his arms as if he had no idea why she’d rejected him. “While you railed at me for being a disreputable gentleman, you never explained *why* or *how* you came to that conclusion. You simply yelled at me, then left without allowing me a chance to defend myself.

Tears sprang to her eyes, but Diana blinked them away. When she’d first overheard other gentlemen speaking of Somerton’s intended plans, she’d been so angry that there hadn’t been time for tears. In the aftermath, she’d cried daily for nearly a fortnight. “When asked, you never denied that you were a rakehell and toying with my affections.”

“You didn’t give me a bloody chance. I was too shocked at your accusation to reply.”

“You nearly ruined me.” Though, what had truly hurt her the most was something that she’d *never* speak of to anyone, *ever*—that he’d bedded her mother while pretending to court her. That is what had truly broken her heart.

The corner of his mouth quirked as his eyes darkened. “Nearly. Not completely.”

“Thank Heavens for that! Had I known what you were truly about, I would never have allowed you to take me down the dark walk at Vauxhall. I would have never so much as allowed a stolen kiss.”

Just remembering that night caused her face to flame.

“Vauxhall is one of my fondest memories.” He grinned. “Certainly more exciting than strolls through Hyde Park, ices at Günter’s, dancing at balls, stolen kisses in gardens…”

With each step Somerton took in her direction, Diana stepped back. She could not let him come any closer. Even in her anger and heartache, she was also quite aware of her vulnerability, as she’d fallen quite deeply for the cad.

“I thought your courtship was of honorable intentions,” she accused.

He stopped and frowned. “Why do you think it was not? Because of stolen kisses in the dark?”

“We shared far more than a few kisses as you know.” He’d been quite skilled in his caresses.

“As I recall, you found my touch quite pleasurable.”

Her face was about to go up in flames. Pleasurable was too tame of a word for what she’d experienced, but that wasn’t the point of this conversation and she needed to put those memories from her mind.

“Was I a game to you? Pressing for what you could gain before you ended your courtship?”

“Why do you believe I intended to end it at all?” he demanded.

“Perhaps it was only your intention to continue until the end of the Season and then we’d go our own separate ways and you’d find another innocent to have your fun with the following year.”

Somerton blinked at her, his eyes growing hard. “I was *not* toying with your affections. I’d never stoop so low. Furthermore, I resent having my honor called into question.”

“You certainly were not considering me for marriage.”

“Who put these ideas into your mind?” he demanded in anger, nearly taking her aback.

For a moment she considered that perhaps she’d been wrong, but the fact that his response was a counter question convinced Diana that she’d been no more than a distraction for the Season and his courtship, kisses and caresses meant nothing more to him than a casual dalliance.

“You did.”

“Me?” he cried in outrage.

“Have you or have you not claimed that ‘if Noah could become a father at the age of five hundred, then I can surely wait to begin producing offspring until age forty’.”

At least he had the good sense to grimace. “It’s true. I’ve said as much.”

“Then I see no further need for any association between us to continue.” She turned and walked away. “Enjoy your next thirteen years as a bachelor, Lord Somerton. Though it will soon be twelve.”

Chapter 4

"BLAST IT ALL." James sank back down on the well. More bricks crumbled and he jumped away before he fell again. Diana wasn't there to save him and even if she were, he doubted that she'd lend him a hand a second time.

Who had spoken out of turn to Diana?

It didn't really matter, he supposed. At least now he understood her hatred for him. Further, he couldn't blame Diana, given what they'd shared in Vauxhall. All he could assume was that she'd been told at the Hearne ball because Vauxhall had only been the night before.

Though, she could have at least asked if those were his intentions before she slapped him.

Perhaps what angered him most was that she so quickly believed what she'd been told, even if it were the truth. But she should have trusted him. Shouldn't he have earned her trust after the weeks he'd spent courting her? Further, it hurt that she so quickly dismissed him. As if she'd never really cared at all. Perhaps she was the one who had been toying with his affections.

A cold hand swiped across his face leaving behind an icy sting as Lady Isolda materialized before him, hand raised and looking quite irate.

"Did you really utter such rubbish?"

"Aye," he admitted.

Worse, he'd said those words so many times that he'd lost count, but they'd always been said in the company of gentlemen in places like Whites. And, until Miss Diana Vail walked into the Bentley ball last March, he'd been adamant that nothing would change.

She'd been breathtaking with her golden hair, wayward curls caressing her neck and temples, the pale green, nearly white gown, hugging her form, emphasizing her full breasts. Breasts he'd longed to caress and feel the weight of in his hands and he'd finally gotten the opportunity that night in Vauxhall.

James was amazed that she'd not gained his notice before. Had he been bloody blind during the previous four years?

In their moments of passion, James had known that the plans he'd set were no longer. He wanted Diana and the only way he could have more was if they married. He'd also faced a truth he'd done his

damnedest to deny—he was in love. It had come as such a shock that he could barely speak.

After he'd returned home from Vauxhall, James had argued with himself that what he was experiencing was no more than lust and desire. Certainly *not* love. But no matter how much he had denied the emotion or how much brandy he'd drunk to numb his heart, James had to face the fact that he did not have another thirteen years of freedom. And as he became used to the idea, accepted the inevitable, he fell asleep, happy with his lot in life as he'd be sharing it with Diana.

He remembered the day of the Hearne ball and that evening as if it had happened yesterday. He'd been nervous as he was about to do something, he never thought he'd do—confess all that was in his heart. But before he could utter a word, she first insulted, then dismissed him. Had he known then what he knew now, he'd have insisted that she listen to him. He would have explained that she, and only she, had altered those blasted plans, but Diana hadn't given him the opportunity.

Until now, he'd lied to himself that it was for the best and he wasn't meant to marry until he was nine and thirty, when in truth, her rejection had not only stunned but hurt him deeply.

"Well, then." Lady Isolda brushed her hands together. "We'll just see what can be done to fix the pickle you've gotten yourself into."

"Pickle?" James asked.

"Yes, pickle. Men, for the most part, often blunder of matters of the heart." She brought a hand to his cheek and James tried not to shiver at the icy touch.

"It is not only my quest, but an honor to help you achieve the greatest of what we all crave—true love."

A sense of foreboding filled him. "I am certain that I do not need your assistance." Besides, if Diana had so little faith in him, why should he bother to pursue her? Hearts heal, after all.

"Oh, Lord Somerton, I'm afraid you do," Lady Isolda insisted as she disappeared, leaving only the sting of cold against his cheek as evidence that she'd been there.

~

"MISS VAIL, WAIT," Sir Orwen called.

She wasn't waiting. She wanted to be home and blessedly free of Somerton.

"The pain in your heart is great, Miss Vail, but you must allow it to heal," Sir Gilbert insisted.

Diana snorted. It was healed, or she'd once thought it was.

As she reached the main path, she first looked back toward the gardens and knew she couldn't return to the gathering. She didn't have the strength to pretend to be happy and force enjoyment of the festivities. Besides, Somerton would return, and she didn't want to chance encountering him again. Worse, that he'd want to further discuss what had happened. She would never, ever discuss what pained her the most. Not only wasn't it proper to do so, but such a conversation would bring further mortification and she'd had quite enough already.

Having grown up in the area, Diana knew all the paths to and from Keyvnor Castle and took the one most secluded to return home to Hollybrook Park.

"He loves you," Sir Gilbert insisted.

Diana snorted. "He loves no one but himself, and perhaps his nieces."

"No. He loves you," Sir Gilbert continued.

The knight was a romantic, nauseatingly so, and would see love in the eyes of a snake. Given the fact that Sir Orwen, the more pragmatic of the two, remained silent, she was assured that no love for her lingered in Somerton's heart.

"Don't be so quick to dismiss or assume," Sir Orwen said thoughtfully.

Diana rolled her eyes. "Not you too."

"There is something most definitely there."

"Desire and passion perhaps, but certainly *not* love."

To think she'd allowed his kisses and caresses. And even though Somerton never spoke of an affection, he'd courted her almost from the beginning of the Season. They danced at every ball, took drives, and so many things that courting couples did that she'd assumed…

Hot tears stung her eyes. That was what she got for assuming anything.

He may not have ruined her, though it was a close thing, Somerton had ruined her heart for anyone else. Not that she didn't have the capacity to love, Diana just wasn't certain she'd ever trust enough to love again.

"Do not leave!" Sir Gilbert cried as she neared the border between Keyvnor and Hollybrook. "I am certain something can be worked out."

Diana was just as certain it would be impossible.

"Let her go," Sir Orwen said. "Give Miss Vail a bit of peace and a chance to recover. We'll work on matters here."

Diana had no idea what he meant, but there was nothing to work on and she wasn't even certain if she would be returning to Keyvnor. At least not while Somerton was a guest.

Chapter 5

"YOU ARE COMING WITH ME," Faye announced as she marched into the sitting room, pulling on her gloves.

James blinked at his younger sister. He had no intention of going anywhere. "The Hamblys have entertainments planned for this afternoon."

"Which is hours away," Faye reminded him. "I need an escort into the village. Mother said I couldn't go unless you accompanied me."

"Me?" he objected. "What of Benedict?" His younger brother was better suited for a jaunt into Bocka Morrow.

"Benedict isn't the one who needs a distraction," Faye announced. "You've been hiding and brooding since yesterday afternoon. You behave as if you've lost your best friend."

In truth, that is exactly how he felt. It hurt when Diana broke from him before, but after a time, James had managed, for the most part, to push the pain aside and went so far as to convince himself that it had only been desire that ruled his heart.

"James?" Faye questioned.

"It's nothing," he finally dismissed. The pain he had hidden from himself had returned yesterday, but today he was angry and not good company for anyone.

"It's *not* nothing," Faye argued. "Does this have anything to do with Miss Vail?"

James' eyes snapped to her. "What do you know of Miss Vail?"

"You did run away and hide as soon as she arrived." Faye snorted. "I know that you were courting her last spring, and I had hoped that you'd finally put that silly notion of not marrying until you were nine and thirty behind you."

"I may not marry even then," he grumbled and took a drink of his brandy. "And, I didn't run away." He'd only been trying to escape a ghost.

"Well, that's not how it looked to me." She smirked. "Now come along. I'd like to be back before the afternoon entertainments begin."

James studied her and then pulled himself from the sofa, setting the brandy aside.

Faye eyed it. "For one who is not bothered by the presence of Miss Vail, you are drinking spirits rather early in the day, aren't you?"

James narrowed his eyes on her. "If you are going to persist in

speaking of Miss Vail, you can find someone else to accompany you into the village."

"Oh, very well. Be miserable. It matters little to me."

"Be certain to stop by the apothecary," Lady Isolda said as she appeared beside the waiting carriage.

Blast it all. Now he had two meddlesome women to deal with.

"Why do you need to visit Bocka Morrow?" James asked as they settled into the carriage.

"I wish to visit the apothecary," Faye answered.

James reached for the door to the carriage. Were Faye and Lady Isolda working together to upend his life? "Why?"

"They carry the most delightful, fragrant soaps. The ones I purchased at Christmas are gone and I wish for more."

He let his hand drop back to the seat. It was an innocent enough reason and James did recall his sister going on and on about those *delightful little soaps*. "As long as that is all."

She blinked at him, her face masked in innocence. "What else would there be?"

His sister was up to something though he doubted Faye was working in concert with a ghost. Just the same, he'd remain wary.

"Did you know that *The Hourglass* is rumored to be owned by a witch?" Faye announced as the carriage pulled onto the road.

"What is *The Hourglass*?" Though he was quite certain he didn't care.

"The *apothecary*," Faye answered, as if he should have known.

James narrowed his eyes on his sister. "Tell me that we are *not* visiting because of a witch."

She blinked again.

"What are you planning, Faye?"

"I simply wish to purchase soap. Though you might wish for something else."

"What could I possibly want from a witch?" He certainly didn't need her assistance. Besides, a ghost had already inserted herself into his life, and that was more than enough for any gentleman.

"A love spell." Faye grinned. "Then you could win Miss Vail's heart."

James massaged his forehead to relieve the growing tension. Maybe he was surrounded by bedlamites after all. "I'm not going to trick Miss Vail into loving me."

Not so long ago he had been certain of Diana's love. She'd not uttered the words, but it was evidenced in their conversations, dances, stolen kisses, a shared passion… He'd been confident that if he'd asked for her hand that Diana would have accepted.

In retrospect, having given the matter a good deal of thought,

thoughts that had kept him awake most of last night, James had concluded that perhaps she hadn't loved him at all. If Diana had, she wouldn't have rejected him so quickly based on rumors or gossip. It didn't matter that the statement was something he'd said a hundred times, the fact was that she'd heard it, accepted it, then condemned him without once asking him to even explain. That was proof she didn't trust him, let alone love him. She should have come to him with her concerns, not accusations.

Perhaps that is what angered and hurt him most. She hadn't trusted him enough to come to him with her concerns. And even though James' heart still longed for hers, he would not give it again until he was certain of hers, if he was *ever* certain.

"Come now, James, I'm only teasing you. We both know none of this Cornish lore nonsense is real anyway."

"Maybe not a love spell," he muttered. "But maybe something that would cause her to at least remain long enough for me to explain…"

"You don't really believe in all this, do you?" she asked in surprise.

Actually, he was surprised that Faye had mentioned the witch in the first place, since she never believed in such nonsense, as she'd put it.

James studied his sister. "Why is this so important to you?"

"Can't you just talk to her? I worry about you relying on a magic spell to solve your problems with Miss Vail."

Faye was the one who mentioned a spell. It hadn't even occurred to him before, and James still wasn't certain he believed in witches or spells of any of that.

"I've one brother who is unhappy, miserable even, and I don't wish to have another living in such a state. You're only setting yourself up for disappointing if you put stock in these supposed witches."

"I'm not the one who mentioned witches in the first place," his voice rose. "And you are the one who insists on visiting the apothecary, need I remind you."

"You mentioned something to make her stay."

"Let it go, Faye, I've no intention of seeking help from a supposed witch. It was simply wishful thinking." He glanced out the window. "Perhaps you should worry about Benedict instead." If anyone needed a keeper, it was his younger brother.

Faye snorted. "Benedict isn't my concern, but you and Markham. He needs to start living again, and you need to get Miss Vail back."

"Markham is living," James assured her of their older brother, to which Faye snorted again.

"He does what he needs for his estate and daughters, but a part of him died right along with his wife. You know that as well as I."

Reluctantly, James had to admit that his sister was correct. Yet, he

didn't see Markham falling in love with anyone else and he would most likely remain unattached for the rest of his days.

"Instead of worrying about me and Miss Vail, perhaps you should put your mind to Markham." Maybe if Faye was too busy meddling in Markham's life, she'd leave him alone.

Lord help him from meddling females!

~

AFTER DIANA HAD ARRIVED BACK at Hollybrook Park yesterday, she'd gone directly to her chambers and had a good long cry. She then vowed not to go near the castle until all the guests were gone, especially the Earl of Somerton. In fact, she wasn't going to leave Hollybrook Park.

"Oh, Diana, you must accompany me into Bocka Morrow. I don't wish to go alone," her sister begged while they broke their fast.

"Nor should she. Not with so many visiting the castle," Adam insisted.

"She can take a maid," Diana suggested, not that she believed anything would happen to her sister between here and the village.

"That's no fun. I wish for *you* to go with me."

"What of Cordelia or Adriana?" One of her younger sisters could accompany Miranda just as well as Diana.

"I need to finish the gown I've been working on as soon as we've finished our breakfast," Adriana answered with excitement. Her sister had taken a great interest in designing and sewing gowns of late. Though Diana couldn't understand her passion, especially when there was a perfectly good modiste in Bocka Morrow.

But at least her sister did have an interest. Since Somerton had broken her heart, Diana couldn't find any enthusiasm for the pastimes she'd once enjoyed.

Diana looked to Cordelia with a lift of an eyebrow, hoping she'd accompany Miranda.

"I'd like to go into Bocka Morrow, as I need to visit Pennick's Book Shop." Then Cordelia pinned their youngest brother with an irritated, bordering on hateful, glare. "However, I'm to watch Edward this morning to make certain that he doesn't get up to any more mischief."

"I'm sorry," he said as if he'd said it so many times already that they should leave him be.

"You shouldn't have been throwing rocks in the first place," Adam disciplined. "What even possessed you to do so?"

Diana had only heard a bit of what had occurred yesterday, something about her brother throwing rocks and one struck a female guest at the castle causing her harm.

It was one thing to throw rocks because, well, he was a boy. It was quite another to do so around people. Adam should blister his bottom for having done so. Afterall, Adam was the closest thing Edward had to a father since theirs had died when Edward was only a year old.

"I was aiming at the pixies."

"Pixies!" Cordelia slammed her hands down on the table, pushing herself up and out of her seat. "Have you lost your mind? Do you know what trouble they can cause for us? Oh, I'd like to box your ears."

Then she glared at Adam for having failed as an older brother.

"He's to be punished," Adam ground out.

"*I'll* see that he is," Cordelia announced then narrowed her eyes on Edward. "As soon as we are finished here, you are going to march right out to the gardens and begin cleaning out weeds and debris. Then this evening you will go out there and play your flute for their enjoyment, all the while apologizing for your childish behavior."

Edward's eyes widened and he looked to Adam for help.

Their older brother shrugged. "It seems perfectly reasonable to me."

"What of gifts?" Adriana asked.

"Yes, gifts should be given as well," Cordelia agreed.

"What kind of gift do you give a pixie?" Edward asked in confusion. "They are just little things, all bothersome and such."

Cordelia glared at him. "They are *not* bothersome, but can be quite mischievous if angered, Edward Vail. You *will* deliver gifts."

"I've bits of lace and ribbon left over from the dress I've been sewing," Adriana offered. "I'll see that they are given to Edward for him to leave in the garden."

All of this was well and good, but it still didn't free Diana from having to accompany Miranda into Bocka Morrow. Unless… "I can see that Edward cleans the garden if you wish to go to Pennick's Book Shop."

Cordelia frowned. "I thank you, but I need to make certain Edward does as he's told, with my supervision, or who knows what havoc the pixies may cause."

Diana's encounters with pixies had been few. In fact, until yesterday, when they helped Sirs Orwen and Gilbert hide the path, she'd not had dealings with them since she was a child. And, given what they'd done, she wasn't all that anxious to help her younger brother apologize. The pixies should be apologizing to her for leaving her vulnerable.

Miranda grinned at Diana and stood. "Shall we?"

As their breakfast was concluded, there wasn't any further argument she could make and thus Diana found herself making the

trek into Bocka Morrow. Thankfully Miranda had suggested the shorter path to the village. It may take them through Keyvnor land, but Diana was unlikely to encounter Somerton.

Unfortunately, no sooner had she stepped onto Keyvnor land than those blasted knights were back.

"We have news," Sir Orwen announced.

"It's urgent that we speak. Love hangs by a delicate thread. If you do not act, the mate of your heart might be lost to you forever," Sir Gilbert insisted in his overly dramatic manner.

Had Diana been alone, she would have told them to go away, not that it ever did any good to do so.

"There is no insurmountable situation that can't be overcome, and I urge you not to be led by emotions."

Diana narrowed her eyes on Sir Gilbert. Oh, she'd love to give him a tongue lashing. Led by emotions indeed! How dare he make such a suggestion. Yes, her emotions were engaged, but so was her mind and she knew what was best for *her*. Not two ghosts who have been haunting these lands for centuries.

"Your heart aches for him as his does for you," Sir Gilbert insisted. "They are meant to beat as one. Hearts and souls united. A passion to surpass all others. Desire that others can only dream of. A future to behold, bathed in gold and hope. A life of—."

"—Bugger it," Sir Orwen barked. "This is a serious matter, not an epic love poem."

"Their love *is* epic."

Diana blew out a sigh and rolled her eyes. She'd get no peace while these two continued to pester her.

"I promise that you will enjoy yourself," Miranda insisted and linked her arm with Diana as she misinterpreted the sigh.

"Exactly what are you shopping for?" Miranda never mentioned a specific item. Not that it mattered, but the more she was in conversation with her sister, the better chance she had of blocking the menacing knights and their inane chatter.

Miranda shrugged.

Her sister never did anything without a purpose.

"Why are we really going to Bocka Morrow?" Diana demanded.

"To visit the apothecary." Miranda admitted.

"Yes, yes, the apothecary, an excellent idea," Sir Gilbert proclaimed.

"No. It isn't. She's a witch," Sir Orwen argued. "We are in this predicament because of blasted witches."

Now Diana *did* want to listen to them and if she were alone, she'd demand to know why witches had cursed them in the first place. Though, if they were as irritating three centuries ago as they are now,

that could have been reason enough.

“Such language in front of the maidens,” Sir Gilbert chastised. “You really must do better, Orwen.”

“Only one heard me and Miss Vail has not exactly been innocent in her speech. She’s thrown out a ‘blast’ on more than one occasion.”

Usually when she was around them.

“Why the apothecary?” Diana asked as she couldn’t get any answers from the knights.

“Um, errr,…well…soaps. The wonderful rose and sage one I purchased before we traveled to London is gone and I must have more.”

Though it was a reasonable explanation, the fact that Miranda took time in answering heightened Diana’s suspicious. Her sister wanted to visit the apothecary for another reason.

“What do you hope to gain from this witch? What is it that you need?” Had she been so caught up with her own misery that Diana had missed a concern about her sister.

Miranda shook her head. “Nothing for me but something for you.”

Diana stopped. “Me? I need nothing.”

Miranda pulled on Diana’s arm to keep her walking. “I see two options. One.” She held up her index finger. “Something to heal your heart so you are no longer in pain.”

Oh, if only there were such a potion or spell.

“The other.” She held up another finger. “A love potion so that you might win Somerton for good.”

Diana stopped again. “I will not use a potion or spell to trick him into loving me.”

“Very well,” Miranda sighed. “Something to heal your heart, though I do believe you are being shortsighted as to the other.”

Diana didn’t need either, which her sister would learn once they reached the apothecary.

Chapter 6

JAMES PAUSED OUTSIDE of the apothecary. Was he really going to ask for a potion from a witch?

Shaking his head, he pulled the door open for his sister, then jumped out of the way as a black cat ran out. Of course there's a black cat. The proprietor was a witch, *if* rumors were to be believed, and didn't all witches keep a cat?

His rational mind had decided that whoever owned the shop was no more a witch than he was. But, given this was Bocka Morrow with residents who believed in magic, ghosts, pixies and mermaids, they'd believe a woman who sold herbs and soaps to be a witch.

With those thoughts, James stepped inside and was immediately assaulted by the strong aroma of herbs, spices and flowers. His nose nearly burned from the onslaught.

"May I help you?" An older woman with long black hair streaked with grey greeted him. Blue woad markings of Celtic symbols were upon her fingers and knuckles, which were quite fascinating. As it was impolite to stare, James focused on her face. She certainly had the eccentric appearance of a witch, he supposed. Though she was far from the hag he'd imagined.

"I'm with my sister." He nodded to Faye who was sniffing the different soaps.

"Are you certain there isn't something you need for yourself?" She pinned him with such an intense stare that James wondered if the witch could see into his mind, his soul.

"You come seeking help, yet you are afraid to ask."

James hated that his face began to heat. He was not a gentleman who became embarrassed.

"I can assure you, that I am in need of nothing." Besides, if he did ask the witch for assistance, he'd never hear the end of it from Faye.

"Come." She stepped from behind the counter. "Share a cup of tea with me and tell me what burdens you."

"I should remain with my sister."

The witch chuckled. "Your sister will smell the soaps over and over until she decides. She'll then spend time with the sachets and candles."

There was no harm in a cup of tea, he supposed, and hopefully, the air wasn't so pungent in the other room, as he was beginning to

develop a headache.

The witch led him to the back where there was a small kitchen and he took a place at the table as she went about heating water. She said nothing, nor did she ask questions and James grew uncomfortable sitting in the silence.

"I am Brighid," she finally said as she gathered cups. "You are?"

For a moment he considered giving a false name so that nobody would ever learn that he was here. "James Bryant." Instead, he just omitted his title.

Brighid tilted her head and smiled. "It is an honor to have the Earl of Somerton in my humble shop."

How the blazes did she know who he was?

Then again, she was a witch, supposedly.

She placed a cup in front of him, the liquid was not as dark as the tea he usually enjoyed, but light, almost a pale greenish, yellowish brown. James leaned forward to sniff.

"Sip and reflect. I will return momentarily."

He didn't come here just to drink tea. *Blast it all.* And what the hell did she wish for him to reflect upon? He already knew what he wanted: A chance to explain to Diana and to also protect his heart to keep from falling in love with her again or being hurt.

~

Oh, Diana did enjoy being in the apothecary. A delightful little shop filled with herbs, candles and whatnot. It also smelled delightful, as if she'd stepped into the garden filled with fragrant wildflowers. She paused just inside the door and inhaled deeply, bringing all the fragrance into her being before blowing out a breath and almost instantly she relaxed.

"Faye," Miranda proclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Lady Faye Bryant was the younger sister of Somerton, and Diana quickly glanced about the shop. Thankfully *he* was not here.

"Shopping, of course!" Lady Faye smiled brightly. "Isn't this delightful?" She held up a lavender soap to Miranda to sniff.

"Lovely! I must get one for myself."

Maybe her fear of having to speak with Jam…Somerton was causing Diana to be suspicious of everyone and every place. And she must refer to him as Somerton, even to herself. The days of intimacy were gone.

"How may I help you?" Brighid glided from the back of the shop toward the two women.

"It is my sister who needs your help," Miranda answered.

Diana shot Miranda a look. "My sister is mistaken," Diana ground

out.

Brighid approached and stared into Diana's eyes. It was quite unnerving.

"Someone has broken your heart," she said after a moment.

She was not willing to admit as much. "I've learned a lesson," she corrected.

"Yes, I see. You use anger as a shield."

How the blazes could she know such? This was the very reason Diana hadn't gone to Adam's grandmother, the wizened gypsy, because she could see too much and Diana didn't wish for anyone, especially her family, to know how deeply she'd been hurt by that rogue.

Lady Faye came forward and placed several soaps, candles and sachets on the counter, then Miranda did the same.

"Excuse me." Brighid returned to the other side of the counter to complete the purchases while Diana wandered about the shop. There was nothing here to help her. Only time would ease her pain.

"Diana, Lady Faye brought her carriage and offered a ride back to Keyvnor. Do you mind?"

"You may come with us as well," Lady Faye offered.

"No, go on ahead." Besides, she preferred to return alone.

"Though you don't seek anything for yourself, what did your sister hope you would gain by coming to my apothecary?" Brighid asked after Miranda and Lady Faye had exited the shop.

"Nothing you can provide," she assured the old woman.

"One never knows."

Diana blew out a sigh. "The first was a love spell, which is quite silly. Even if such existed, I'd not use it. If a gentleman cannot fall in love with me naturally why would I wish him to do so under the influence of magic."

"Few are as wise as you," the witch chuckled. "I know the rumors that surround me, and many misses have come seeking such a charm."

"Yes, well, I'm not so foolish and I'll never be foolish again."

"Be careful that you do not guard your heart so tightly that you miss out on the very thing you seek."

"I seek nothing," Diana insisted.

"Do you not?" Brighid questioned, her eyebrow raised as she studied Diana. "You said the first thing your sister suggested was a love spell, what was the second."

"Something to ease the pain in my heart."

"Yet you do not ask for such."

"No. It's safer to remember the pain so mistakes are not made again."

Brighid tisked. "I fear you are blinding and binding yourself. You

might believe you were foolish before, and perhaps you were, but forsaking any chance at love is equally as foolish. Do you wish to grow old alone?"

These were words that Diana did not want to think on. Further, Brighid was wrong. "It's preferable when a heart cannot be trusted."

Brighid took Diana's hand in hers. "It is not a love spell you need, or something to ease your pain, but clarity to see the truth."

Diana blinked at her. Clarity would ease much in her mind. "Does such exist?"

Brighid took a deep breath. "I must think on it."

Chapter 7

JAMES HAD fiNALLY TAKEN his last sip of tea, though he'd done little reflection. His need was the same as when he'd first entered the establishment. All he wanted was a peaceful conversation with Diana. A chance to explain. However, he also wished to protect himself so that she didn't have a second opportunity to crush what was left of his heart beneath the heel of her kid boot.

As Brighid had not returned, James stood and made his way back into the shop, certain that Faye had found what she needed and was ready to depart. Instead he found Diana, her hand wrapped in those of the witch.

"Miss Vail," he greeted.

Diana jerked at his voice and glance toward him. "Lord Somerton," she replied crisply.

Brighid looked between the two, studying. "Your sisters brought you here?"

He nodded.

"Yes." Diana answered.

"Where *is* my sister?" James asked when he noticed that Faye was not about.

"She returned to the castle with Miss Miranda, in *your* carriage," Brighid cackled.

She wouldn't. James strode toward the door and out onto the walk. His carriage was gone.

She had better be in hiding when he returned to the castle, or he'd…James wasn't certain what he'd do but considered whether she was too old to be taken over a knee.

Irritated, he pushed his fingers through his hair and stepped back into the apothecary.

"I believe the sisters are trying to bring about a match," Brighid observed. "Am I correct?"

"We need no assistance," Diana ground out. "There is no match. There never was."

"And you have judged me without question."

Diana raised an eyebrow in challenge. "There are those who don't wish to wait so long, Lord Somerton."

"Perhaps what you *both* require is clarity," Brighid announced and made her way to behind the counter where she stopped to study the

numerous jars stacked along the back wall before she began removing a few and putting them on the counter, all the while mumbling to herself. One she lifted then shook her head and put it back.

"This really isn't necessary," James insisted only to be shushed by Brighid.

"I'd really rather just go." Diana started for the door.

"Your sisters want this. You will stay. Come back and stand beside Somerton."

Brighid hadn't even glanced in their direction so how did she know that Diana had already been half-way to the door?

She edged herself back to her space as Brighid turned, placed another jar on the counter then retrieved her mortar and pestle.

"My sister doesn't believe in magic," James stated.

Brighid arched a questioning eyebrow at Diana.

"You know my sister does," she admitted.

Brighid nodded. "One sister decided a chance meeting was needed and another wished for magical elements to help the courtship along."

"There is no courtship," Diana insisted.

"After you've brewed this tea, you must drink it at the same time and in the same room," she instructed as she began pinching out the herbs, leaves and dried flowers from the array of jars, dropping them in the small bowl. "Once you've finished your cups, you will be in the correct frame of mind to discuss what troubles you both. It will bring clarity of mind and heart so that you can truly know one another."

Diana snorted. "Lord Somerton doesn't wish to hear what I have to say."

"I heard plenty. You are the one who isn't willing to listen to me."

"You've no defense. You readily admitted your plan to remain a bachelor for at least another twelve years," Diana nearly yelled.

"Oh, I do believe I need to make this stronger than normal," Brighid tisked as she measured more dried leaves and flowers before putting then into a pestle.

"While I appreciate your offer of assistance, Brighid, I've had quite enough interference already." Besides, did he really wish to know what was in Diana's heart? Did he wish for her to know his? "First my sister drags me here and then absconds with my carriage. And when at Castle Keyvnor, Lady Isolda won't give me any peace."

One of the jars Brighid had been holding clattered onto the counter, spilling dried herbs in the process. "What did you say?"

"Lady Isolda," James dismissed. "A meddlesome ghost."

Brighid lost a bit of her color and turned to Diana. "Does a ghost plague you as well?"

It was as if Brighid held her breath waiting for the response.

"Not one, but two," Diana admitted. "Sir Orwen and Sir—."

"—Gilbert," Brighid finished and quickly gathered the jars before her and started putting them back on the shelf. Her hands were shaking so badly that she nearly dropped two of them.

"Go, both of you."

"What of clarity?" Diana asked.

Brighid grabbed the mortar and tossed the mixture into the receptacle. "I cannot help. It is forbidden."

"Forbidden?" James questioned. "I don't understand."

"Just go, and please do not come here again."

Brighid came around the counter and practically pushed them from the apothecary and in a blink, James and Diana were on the walk and the door to the shop locked behind them.

"How very odd," Diana muttered.

"Odd, indeed."

~

THE VERY REASON Diana had not wanted to return to the castle was because of Somerton. Now, here she was, abandoned by her sister in Bocka Morrow and standing beside the very man she wished to avoid.

"What did she mean that helping was forbidden?"

"I've no idea." Diana shrugged. "Sir Orwen had mentioned that he and Sir Gilbert were in their predicament because of witches."

They turned to take the cobbled road back to Keyvnor. Diana didn't mind the walk, but Somerton may since he'd originally brought a carriage.

"Your knights, how long have they been haunting Keyvnor?"

Had they ever mentioned a length of time? She couldn't remember. "Centuries."

Somerton nodded. "Lady Isolda said her three hundredth anniversary will be the summer solstice."

Though she shouldn't encourage her knights with discussions or questions, Diana knew she needed to find out how long the two had been stuck and unable to move on. She glanced back at the apothecary and frowned. "Do you think your lady and my knights are connected somehow?"

Somerton shrugged. "They must be because Brighid immediately asked if you were plagued by a ghost after she learned Lady Isolda's name."

"This is very odd," Diana murmured as she tried to reason it out. Why would Somerton's ghost have anything to do with her knights? Neither Sir Orwen nor Sir Gilbert had ever mentioned her before.

"She wishes to be free," he offered.

"As do the knights."

For the knights, they insisted she needed to find love, not that she'd mention the same to Somerton.

Perhaps Lady Isolda had a different purpose for him and the two might not even be related. "Has Lady Isolda mentioned why she lingers?" Diana asked slowly.

"It doesn't matter. She won't gain what she hopes."

If Lady Isolda was of the same purpose as the knights, then Diana had just received confirmation that Somerton had never loved her and despite how much she tried to protect herself, it still stung. And for that very reason, she didn't engage Somerton in conversation again as they trudged up Castle Street toward Keyvnor. As Somerton was equally silent, Diana could only assume he didn't wish to speak with her either.

It was strange in a way. When they'd been in London, before the night of the Hearne ball when her world had come crashing down, she and Somerton had conversed often, on all manner of topics, even teased and argued, but mostly in fun. Of course, at the time, she thought Somerton was courting her when his true intent had been simply seduction. Just as he'd seduced her mother.

Then again, it was just as possible that her mother had seduced Somerton so she couldn't put *all* that blame on him. Yet, it took two to participate and no doubt he was seduced willingly.

It was bad enough that he never intended to offer for her, but the true pain came from the fact that he'd been her mother's lover while courting Diana. That was something she could never, ever forgive, nor was it something Diana could bring herself to speak of, as the humiliation was so great.

Though he didn't speak, Somerton did behave as if something were on his mind. He would pause, open his mouth, then shake his head as if he'd decided against voicing his thoughts.

While it was quite aggravating because she wished he'd just say what he was thinking, she was also glad that she wasn't forced to converse on any topic he may propose.

"Diana, stop."

She didn't but kept walking.

"We need to discuss what happened in London."

That's what had been on his mind? "There is no further need to do so." Besides, it still pained her, and Somerton was the last person she'd allow to see her cry.

"So, I'm not allowed to defend myself?" He hurried to her side.

"It's been discussed. There is no defense, let's not speak of it again." Blast, her eyes were becoming damp and she'd not have it. If she allowed him to upset her, she just might blurt out that she knew all about his affair with her mother and that would never do because

she wanted to forget it, not discuss it.

“Then you are not the woman I thought you to be. The woman I courted in London was rational,” he called.

“We weren’t courting,” she yelled back. “At least have the decency to admit the truth. I was a means to an end, a flirtation, a way to keep your mother from forcing other misses on you, and possible seduction. But you never had any intention of a future.”

Diana hurried forward to put as much distance between her and Somerton as she could, but the moment the road lead her over the border and onto Keyvnor land, the knights appeared before her. “Well?” Sir Orwen demanded.

“Was the witch able to assist?” Sir Gilbert questioned then slid a knowing look to Somerton and grinned. “Have you found love?”

“Devil it!” Diana nearly screamed in frustration. It was bad enough that Somerton was hounding her steps but now she had to deal with these two as well. With determination, she pushed right through them, not even caring that Somerton watched on because she’d had quite enough!

Chapter 8

JAMES STARTLED at Diana's curse, then realized her ghosts must be with her just as Lady Isolda appeared before him.

"Blast it all!"

"I've had quite enough of you two," Diana snarled.

"Lovely. You two are talking," Lady Isolda gave a little skip. "Next you must woo her with poetry, flowers, flattery, and you must be quick about it as we haven't much time."

"I'll do not such thing," James argued. He'd already done so, and it hadn't won Diana's heart.

Diana turned, eyebrow raised, and mouth pinched. "She's back?"

"Aye."

"Mine as well," she grumbled. "I wish they'd just leave me alone," Diana called into the nothingness before her.

"I quite agree." He shot a look to Lady Isolda. Even she must understand that a match between him and Diana was impossible. Diana wouldn't even talk to him so how the bloody hell could he make it right. And he'd not realized she was more stubborn than a mule when they were in London.

"What does she wish for you to do?" Diana asked.

"Nothing that concerns you."

Diana pulled back at his irritated tone.

"I'm sorry, but Lady Isolda is making impossible demands."

She nodded as if she did understand and perhaps her knights were telling her the same. Though it would be unlikely anyone was telling her to court him. Misses did not court gentlemen.

"Oh, this is too much. Would the two of you cease and desist!" Diana yelled to what James assumed were the knights, as she was not looking at him.

He understood completely.

"Well, if the witches are going to be of no assistance, I know who will," Diana announced.

James looked to her. "Who?"

"Madam Boswell," Diana declared.

James had to stop and think for a moment. "The old gypsy who tells fortunes? Isn't she your grandmother?"

"Not mine, but Lynwood's," Diana answered. "Adam's mother died when he was a child and then Father married my mother." She

shrugged as she trudged on. “And she does far more than that.” At those words, Diana quickened her steps, marching past the castle and toward Hollybrook Park.

“She’ll not help and even if she wished to do so, it is not in her power,” Lady Isolda informed James.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“It’s a curse,” the ghost answered.

“Madam Boswell has experience in dealing with curses,” Diana answered, unaware that he’d posed the question to Lady Isolda.

Regardless of whether the old woman could help or not, James hurried after Diana.

~

BLESSEDLY, the two knights disappeared once Diana stepped onto Hollybrook Park. As she and Somerton neared the bright red *vardo,* the old gypsy stood. There were few *vardos* and gypsies in the camp this time of year, as most were traveling from town to town and fair to fair, telling fortunes, dancing and playing music for money. Only the elderly, such as Adam’s grandmother, remained on the land they’d been given for their winter camp years ago.

“Diana, it is good to see you’ve returned,” the old woman greeted before she turned to study Somerton.

“This is Lord Somerton,” Diana quickly introduced him. “I need your assistance.”

Madam Boswell frowned, staring deep into Diana’s eyes. It was all a bit unnerving and no matter how many times she’d sat with Adam’s grandmother, Diana always feared she could see more than anyone should. It was the very reason she’d not visited since her return from London, but something must be done.

“What disturbs you?”

Diana blew out a breath. “Those two knights. Why won’t they leave me alone?”

“That is not all,” Madam Boswell said slowly, still searching Diana’s eyes before patting her hand. “Come child. Sit with me. You too, Lord Somerton.”

Diana followed and settled on a small stool beside a cooking fire as Adam’s grandmother prepared cups of tea.

“Isn’t there anything you can do to make them go away? Or fashion a talisman that I can carry that will keep them from bothering me.”

“First, you need to tell me who they are,” Madam Boswell reminded her, and Diana quickly explained the two ghosts that have been pestering her.

“I’ve a ghost that is bothering me as well,” Somerton added. “Any assistance you could provide would be appreciated.”

“Does your ghost go by the name of Lady Isolda?”

Diana pulled back in surprise.

“Yes, she does,” Somerton answered.

Madam Boswell shook her head and sighed. “There is nothing I can do. It is not in my power.”

Madam Boswell had protected Charlotte last fall and had helped Charlotte’s brother find love last Christmas, yet she couldn’t manage to make one little talisman for her? It simply wasn’t fair. “Why me? What quest? Why can’t they choose someone else?”

Adam’s grandmother frowned. “They did not explain?”

“No.” In truth, Diana had never asked. Questioning encouraged and the last souls on Earth Diana wanted to offer encouragement were those two. “They’ve claimed that I’m their quest and are pledged to me, which is ridiculous.”

Madam Boswell looked to Somerton. “Has Lady Isolda been equally as secretive.”

“I know what she wants from me,” he ground out.

“Yet you don’t intend to grant her desire?”

The way the gypsy studied Somerton was unnerving, but at least she was gazing into his soul instead of Diana’s.

“What she wishes is impossible,” he answered.

“Is it?” the gypsy persisted.

“Yes.” He answered in such a way to indicate that he’d entertain no further questions from Madam Boswell.

“Why are the three intent on us?” Diana finally demanded.

Madam Boswell sighed. “I shall share the tale.” Then she took a sip of her tea as if there was no urgency in this matter and they’d simple settled down for a pleasant conversation.

“Long ago, Sir Orwen and Sir Gilbert were at Keyvnor Castle to participate in a jousting tournament. They’d always been competitive on the field and off. At this particular tournament, they also fell in love with the same maiden, Lady Isolda. She was quite beautiful, and many knights wished to carry her favour.”

Diana blinked at the old woman. “How do you know this?”

“Any of the locals could have told you,” she brushed away the question. “The only way we know that they’ve not succeeded in their quest is when the storms come the night of the Summer Solstice. The same time every year, and then disappear before they reach the shore. Though we’ve also wondered if it was simply a coincidence since nobody has complained of them in decades,”

“Probably not since 1765,” Diana grumbled.

“1765?” Somerton asked.

“The last time another miss saw them. They failed.” Diana sipped her tea.

“Yes, I remember.” Madam Boswell smiled fondly. “My Eva, Adam’s mother, was only two at the time. The two knights would not cease pestering the one miss who could see them. She was a guest at the castle and no matter how much she pleaded for help from the witches, it was forbidden. In the end, it was the viscount who ran away due to the haunting of Lady Isolda and thus the curse could not be broken,” Madam Boswell chuckled.

“Why are they cursed?” Diana demanded.

“Patience, Diana.” The old woman shook a permanently bent finger at her.

Diana blew out a breath, determined to rein in her patience while Madam Boswell took another sip of tea.

“Lady Isolda was quite taken with the knights at first. But soon, she grew irritated with their constant bickering.”

“I understand her annoyance,” Diana grumbled.

“After the constant competition for her hand, a challenge was issued.”

Somerton leaned forward. “She demanded such?”

“She did not ask it of them, and further, there was no guarantee the victor would gain her in the end, but they were too caught up in the rivalry to give her such consideration.”

“Gentlemen have not changed in that regard,” Diana grumbled.

“What is your meaning?” Somerton demanded.

“Gentlemen rarely give consideration to the woman when only concerned with their selfish desires.” Such as when a gentleman pursues a lady in a way that makes her believe he intends more than courtship, when all the while he simply wished a dalliance with no intention of betrothal, she didn’t add.

“Yes, well, women often assume much and instead of simply asking, judge and dismiss.”

“Sometimes they don’t wish to be lied to,” Diana argued.

“I never lied to you.”

She stared at him. In that he *did* speak the truth. Somerton had offered her no promises. He’d never spoken words of love. It was she who had assumed. She had been the fool. “You are correct.”

With that, she turned back to Madam Boswell. “I apologize, please go on.”

The old woman studied them both, calculation in her dark eyes, then continued. “It was the Summer Solstice of 1512,” she continued. “Given this is to be the three hundredth anniversary, I can understand why they grow anxious.”

Lady Boswell took another sip of tea, vexing Diana, who wished to

be told the story so that she could leave.

"The day had been long with jousting, feasting, music and celebration, and as the sun finally dipped into the horizon, and the knights deep in their cups, the two found themselves bickering once again. One insult led to another and soon the two were at the edge of the cliff, swords drawn, ready to engage in battle. The one who lived would win Lady Isolda's hand."

Yet, they were both dead so something tragic must have occurred.

"A storm was coming in off the sea, but it didn't stop the two."

Diana brought a hand to her throat, anxious and not certain she wished to know what happened next.

"Lady Isolda, having heard what they were about, ran to them, begged them to cease, promised that she'd pick one, but they ignored her."

"As gentlemen tend to do," Diana sighed.

"Diana," Somerton ground out in warning.

"I did not give you leave to address me as such."

He grinned at her, the rotten rogue.

"I rescind it."

"Would the two of you quit bickering," Madam Boswell snapped.

Diana ducked her head. "I apologize. Please, go on."

"Lady Isolda yelled, screamed and begged but it was as if they didn't hear her and she wasn't paying attention to her footing."

The old woman paused to take a sip of her tea and Diana was certain she only did so to try her patience.

"Only the screams as she fell from the cliff brought the two knights out of their combat and they rushed forward to find their love crumbled on the rocks beneath them."

"Good God! That's how she died? I'd no idea," Somerton offered.

"It was then that Sir Orwen and Sir Gilbert turned on each other again, blaming the other for the death of Lady Isolda. They fought without swords, but with hands, fists, wrestling to gain the upper hand to do the other harm until the two rolled off the cliff and to the same death as Lady Isolda."

"How so very tragic." Diana was surprised at the overwhelming grief she experienced for deaths that had occurred nearly three centuries earlier. "That still doesn't explain the curse," Diana finally realized.

"Because of their bitter animosity, and so little regard for Lady Isolda, the two have been cursed to remain upon this earth until they learn to work together in assisting another maid in finding true love."

"Why me? Why not someone else?"

"Because, dear Diana, you are the only one who can see them."

She blinked at Madam Boswell. "How is that possible?"

“You are the chosen one.”

“Chosen by whom?” she cried.

“That, I cannot answer, but it was in the curse that every so often one would come along that could see the knights and the two would be given the opportunity to free themselves.”

“Is it the same for Lady Isolda?” Somerton asked.

“Yes, she must also help someone find love. However, she must help someone at the same time as the knights or the curse will not be lifted. She too has only been seen by few.”

Diana’s stomach tightened. “Are they required to bring the only two people who see them together?” If that were the case, the ghosts would fail in their quest yet again.

“I don’t believe that is a stipulation,” Adam’s grandmother answered, much to Diana’s relief. “However, I’m certain the ghosts find it more expedient if they can work together, as they are limited in what they can accomplish when the source of their quest is the only human who can see or hear them. In this instance, the knights are talking to Diana and Lady Isolda is talking to Somerton, yet the ghosts can converse with each other.”

“Were the ghosts in the garden with you yesterday, Dia…Miss Vail?” Somerton asked.

“Yes, was Lady Isolda with you?”

“She was.” He nodded. “She settled on you the moment you arrived, and I can only assume it was because your knights prompted her.”

“Of that, I do not doubt,” Diana blew out. She would have a word with them when she next ventured onto Keyvnor land and explain why a match with Somerton was impossible.

“Who cursed them in the first place?” Somerton asked.

Madam Boswell grinned. “The witches, of course.”

“Why would they do such a thing? They were two foolish knights,” Somerton demanded.

“Because Lady Isolda was a witch. They took her life and now must pay for their foolishness.”

“Apparently I must as well,” Diana grumbled as she finished her tea. “Why must Lady Isolda pay?”

“Because she’d used magic to gain their love and affection but did not have the power to undo the spell before it was too late. For using magic in such a selfish manner, she too must help another find love.”

“At least they aren’t *required* to bring the two of *us* together, or they’d be doomed.” Diana stood and set her cup aside. “Thank you for your assistance, Madam Boswell. Good day Lord Somerton.” Diana turned on her heel and marched toward Hollybrook Park.

Chapter 9

JAMES CAME TO HIS FEET, intent on going after Diana.

"Sit," the old gypsy barked. And like a good hunting dog, James did just that, though he hadn't considered his reaction until he once again settled on the stool.

"You!" she pointed a crooked finger at him. "You caused Diana pain. Explain."

Though Madam Boswell was an ancient gypsy, bent from age, she still terrified him. "Nothing."

She snorted.

"If anyone has been wronged, it is me," James defended, then went on to explain his courtship, and how it was Diana who had crushed him.

"That girl." Madam Boswell shook her head in disgust without offering anything further, but he didn't dare stand again until told to do so.

"Go." The gypsy waved him away. "I tire of imbeciles. Leave me."

"I'm not the one being foolish."

The gypsy snorted. "You are as guilty as she." The gypsy pulled herself slowly to her feet. "Not only does Lady Isolda's future lie in the balance, but I fear Diana's does as well. Think, speak and act wisely, Lord Somerton." She turned her back and hobbled to the wagon, leaving James to stare after her.

Think, speak and act wisely? What the blazes did she mean by that? Further, he certainly had no power to destroy Diana.

Maybe the old woman was a bit daft.

Shaking his head, James headed back to the castle.

"Where have you been?" his mother demanded as soon as he entered the castle. "You were to accompany Faye into Bocka Morrow, yet she returned with that Vail chit."

James pulled back in offense. "She's the one who left me behind. Absconded with the carriage if you must know, and I was left to return on foot. If anyone needs a lecture, it's your daughter."

His mother harrumphed. "That wouldn't have happened if you would have kept a better eye on her."

Bloody hell! Was he expected to dog Faye's every step?

"I do not like her choice of friends," she offered. "It's bad enough when you were chasing that other Vail girl about London last spring,

and I will not have my daughter befriended and influenced by another of them." Venom dripped from her words.

"What exactly do you find so objectionable about Miss Vail?" He'd asked before but his mother was vague in her answer.

"That family is entirely unsuitable to be linked to ours and that is all I will say on the matter." With that, she turned in a huff, nose in the air and marched off.

James simply shook his head and turned for the billiards room, in much need of brandy.

~

DIANA HADN'T WANTED to return to Keyvnor the next day, but Adam forced her to do so, reminding her that they'd promised to be in attendance for the afternoon lawn games.

Why couldn't Charlotte deliver their child now? That would require Adam to remain at Hollybrook Park as he'd not want to be too far from his wife, then Diana would remain as well…But the babe wasn't due for another month, by their estimation. Far enough away that Adam could join in the wedding festivities, but too close to delivery for Charlotte to be seen in public.

When they arrived at the castle, they were directed to the gardens and back lawn where guests had already gathered to participate in the various outdoor games about to get underway. While her brother and sisters discussed which games they'd like to participate in, and with whom, Diana decided not to join them. Normally she'd enjoy the activities but today Diana's heart was not in the entertainments. Not when Somerton seemed to be unaffected by what they'd learned. She watched as he laughed and talked with several misses, even flirted with some.

Had he now decided to find love? Was it for himself or did he wish to help Lady Isolda?

Not that it mattered one way of the other and Diana should be happy that he wasn't bothering her.

"Miss Vail, something must be done. Time runs short," Sir Orwen hissed in her ear.

"If you do not find love within the next few days, we will be stuck here for at least another year," Sir Gilbert pleaded.

"Or longer. Nobody else has seen us since 1765. Must we be forced to wait another forty or fifty years?"

"Must we be doomed to relive that fateful night every Summer Solstice?"

These last words startled her, remembering the story Madam Boswell had told her. "You must do so every year?" Diana asked.

“Yes, every single year and it’s grown quite tiring,” Sir Orwen complained.

“I’m sorry that you must suffer so, but if falling in love was so easy, I would have done so by now,” Diana whispered.

“But you did find love,” Sir Gilbert reminded her.

“I only thought I had. It turned out not to be the case.”

“Can you not at least try for our sake?” Sir Orwen demanded.

As they grew closer to the summer solstice, he grew crankier. Not that Diana could blame him. If she’d been stuck living at Keyvnor for three hundred years, she’d be quite testy too. And now, to know that they must relive that night must be quite torturous indeed since they knew how it would end. Why, she’d be terrified to relive such an experience even a second time, let alone three hundred.

“Fine,” she quietly agreed, but only because she felt sorry for them. “I’ll talk to the bachelors and see if one of them might do.”

“No,” Sir Gilbert cried. “It can’t be just anyone. It must be him.” He nodded toward Somerton.

“That’s not true,” Diana argued. “Madam Boswell said that it didn’t have to be the gentleman Lady Isolda found.”

Sir Orwen snorted. “She is mistaken. It must be you and it must be him for you are the only ones who see us. If you fall in love with anyone other than each other the curse will not be broken.”

“Then I’m afraid you are doomed to remain at Keyvnor a bit longer,” Diana ground out as Somerton offered his arm to Miss Baily and escorted her toward the wooded path.

He stopped and pressed the bridge of his nose as his shoulders dropped. The young woman looked up at him with concern, then he turned to her, offered a slight bow before he excused himself.

“How every odd,” Diana muttered.

“Not odd at all,” Sir Orwen said. “Lady Isolda just gave him a thorough tongue lashing.”

“How did you even hear her from so far away?” Diana asked.

“We are connected. She could have been at the far edge of the property and we still would have heard her,” Sir Orwen complained.

“She told Somerton to concentrate on you, and that it must be you, Miss Vail, and not some ninny miss,” Sir Gilbert laughed.

“Well, he didn’t listen,” Sir Orwen grumbled, “Or Somerton would be marching in our direction instead of away.”

“Are you certain it must be him and I?” Diana questioned. “Might you have misunderstood?”

“Misunderstood?” Sir Orwen asked affronted. “Misunderstood? We’ve been cursed for nearly three hundred years. Yes, we understood. Now go after him and fall in love and make him fall in love with you.” He pointed in Somerton’s direction.

“One doesn’t simply fall in love because they are ordered to do so,” Diana hissed, resenting him ordering her to do so. Yes, she understood Sir Orwen’s desire to be free, but she wasn’t going to ruin her life in the process.

Chapter 10

WAS he to get no peace?

James assumed that he could fall in love with anyone. Not that he expected to fall in love in a few days but thought Lady Isola would be happy with him for taking an interest in any available miss. Instead, she blistered his ears and informed him that it *must* be Diana.

Blast it all!

"Go to her," Lady Isolda whispered in his ear.

"If Diana wished to speak to me, she'd come here."

"Have matters changed so much that misses now court gentlemen?"

He kicked at a pebble on the walk. "No."

"Then go to her."

"She doesn't want me," James reminded the ghost.

"Oh, you poor, foolish man," She tisked. "Until your gender evolves, though it's highly unlikely as it hasn't in three hundred years, I'll be bound to Keyvnor for eternity."

"Isn't that a bit melodramatic."

She speared him with a look that would kill a lesser man. "Three hundred years!" she emphasized. "You are here, and she is there."

"You forget, she doesn't want me."

"Must we continue to have the same discussion?"

"It's the truth."

"No, it is not, and you are blind!"

His heart lifted. "How do you know?" he asked slowly.

"Simply by the look in her eyes when she sees you and you aren't looking. You need to make right what you've done wrong."

"I'm not the one who ended our courtship. She did." He'd not beg any woman.

"She's in pain. She's been hurt."

"Her pain? What of mine?"

Lady Isolda threw up her hands in disgust. "That's it then. I am doomed to remain on this earth because of *blind, prideful, foolish* men." She emphasized each of her derogatory terms with a poke in his chest. The force of which James felt as if he were being skewered by an icicle.

James looked over to where Diana stood. She'd been watching him but quickly looked away so as not to be caught.

“Pride?”

“Yes pride,” Lady Isolda stated. “You could have explained the incorrect assumption by now, but her rejection stung, thus pride has been the one and only motivating factor in all decisions you have made since. Such an attitude will see you become a bitter old man.”

“What of Diana?”

“Her stubbornness is born from pain. She loved you but she is too afraid to risk again. I do not envy trying to win her back, but you must. If not for yourself, then for me.”

“She should have trusted me.” That is what hurt the most.

“Did it ever occur to you that in the pain she decided that she could not trust her heart? That if she asked, you’d not offer the assurance she needed. Nobody wishes to compound their pain.”

“While anger could be a welcomed friend,” he concluded. Anger was usually the best to mask the more vulnerable emotions. He should know. He’d been carrying anger like a mantle since that day.

“Therein you are not incorrect,” Lady Isolda agreed. “My question is, what do you intend to do about it?”

James didn’t wish to become bitter and even though he’d vowed to remain a bachelor for the next twelve years, those years no longer looked as promising and free as he’d once viewed them. In fact, they looked incredibly lonely.

~

DIANA TRIED to look anywhere but where Somerton stood, yet she could feel him watching her.

Why did it have to be him?

“Miss Vail, might I have a moment of your time.”

She glanced up to find Somerton standing before her.

“Why?”

Why was he so handsome? Why did he have to kiss so wonderfully? Why did he have to pretend to care for her? Why had he gone to *her mother’s* bed?

“It’s been suggested that because of pride, I might not have behaved as I should in London.”

She snorted.

Somerton took a deep breath. “I enjoyed what we shared. Your anger took me aback the night of the Hearne ball. Further, I should have explained, and could have if you would have afforded me the opportunity.”

Diana studied him. Why did he wish to make amends now, and could she trust him?

“We should at least discuss what you overheard, and any other

issues that you might have with my person."

"Why?"

"Perhaps simply so these three pesky ghosts might give us peace."

There was humor in his brown eyes. Was this only a game to him, just as it had been in London?

"Please, Diana."

Blast, why didn't he address her as Miss Vail, as she had requested. It was so much easier to remain immune to him under the guise of formality. But her name on his lips still warmed her, which proved how susceptible she still was to his charms.

"I'm not certain speaking will bring anyone peace." In fact, she was quite certain it would only cause her more pain and humiliation.

"You've not even heard what I have to say."

"I've heard enough, Lord Somerton. You did not deny the desire to remain a bachelor, from that alone I can surmise that I was nothing more than a dalliance."

She could not continue to look into his handsome face and warm eyes, remembering how those strong lips had felt against hers. It dredged up a longing deep inside, something she tried to ignore.

Just as she turned from him, a rock flew past her and Diana jerked to see where it had come from only to see her younger brother, Edward, running away.

"Blast!"

Diana wheeled around at Somerton's curse only to find him with his fingers pressed against the side of his cheek, blood seeping around them. Quickly she fished her handkerchief from her reticule and pressed it against the cut. "I'm so very sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? You did not throw the rock," he insisted. "Though I didn't see who did, I dearly hope it wasn't one of my nieces or I might not bring them any treats for a fortnight."

"It was not them and I believe I was the intended target." Blood seeped through her kerchief and she had to fold it again and press the clean side to his face.

"Why would anyone throw a rock at you?" he asked with concern.

"The culprit was my younger brother and he will be punished."

Light dawned in his brown eyes. "The infamous Edward Vail?"

"Yes," Diana frowned. "What do you know of him?"

"Only that he got up to mischief with my nieces. Rocks were involved in that as well."

"Ah, yes, I recall hearing of the incident. Edward was punished, but apparently he needs stronger discouragement."

"Boys do throw rocks," Somerton offered.

"Which is all fine and good as long as they aren't thrown at humans, pixies or helpless animals."

Somerton's eyebrows rose. "Did you say pixies?"

"Of course. That is what my brother and your nieces were throwing rocks at that day. Didn't you know?"

"Yes, well, I was told, but you don't really believe in pixies, do you?" he asked quietly, as if he was concerned with her sanity.

"Have you not been conversating with a ghost these past days?" Diana countered.

"That's quite different. They are real," he argued. "Not that I'd admit such to anyone outside of Keyvnor or the good people of London would find me an uncomfortable cell at Bedlam.

"If ghosts are real, why can't you believe in pixies, witches or mermaids even."

He snorted. "Now I know your gist. I'll accept ghosts as I'm plagued by one, and will admit that some may *practice* witchcraft and attempt spells and all that rot, but there is nothing you can say or do to make me believe in pixies and especially mermaids, Diana."

She just sighed, sad for him really, but a closed mind often cannot be opened.

More blood seeped through the makeshift bandage. "This handkerchief is not helping. Let's get you inside where I might better care for your injury." She took his hand to replace hers. "Hold it there." Then she led him to the castle and entered through a door leading into a small parlor where she located a maid and asked for the items necessary to clean his wound.

"Please have a seat and let me take a look at the damage my brother caused."

Chapter 11

WHEN DIANA BENT FORWARD, her breasts on full display by the gape in her gown, James nearly forgot that he was injured.

Those globes were as perfect as they'd been in Vauxhall when he'd finally been given the opportunity to caress and kiss them.

He spread his legs so that she might step closer to view his injury when in truth, he simply wanted her closer to him.

Given how she had treated him these past few days, James was surprised with the care Diana now displayed, not that he'd argue. He would gladly be injured several times over if that was what it took to bring her near.

"I've got warm water, soap, ointments and bandages, Miss Vail," a maid announced as she entered, carrying a tray of items.

"Thank you. Please put them on the table.

The maid did as instructed. "Would you need anything else?"

"No, you may go. Thank you."

Diana took the handkerchief away, then wet a cloth before pressing it against his face. "The bleeding does seem to have finally let up."

"Yes, but will I have a scar?"

Diana snorted. "Do you fear your face being ruined and that misses might run from you instead of pursue?"

"On the contrary. A well-placed scar adds mystery, especially to an already devilishly handsome face."

Diana shook her head and gave him a doleful look. "I fear that there will be little permanent proof of the horror you experienced today, Lord Somerton. But, if it is a scar you wish, I can certainly grant you that favor."

"And take great enjoyment in doing so I suppose."

A smile pulled at her lips. "Perhaps a month ago I would have taken great pleasure in scratching your eyes out, but I've recovered."

Yet, she hadn't forgiven, even though he'd done no wrong.

"Don't let your pride stand in the way," Lady Isolda whispered in his ear as if she could read his mind.

Diana dabbed at his face, along the cut, and then his cheek and he assumed she was washing away the blood.

"I don't believe you need a bandage. The bleeding has stopped."

"Thank goodness because I'd look quite ridiculous."

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “But the misses would flock to you like bees to honey with concern as to what happened.”

James placed his hand over hers to stop her ministrations and looked up. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Mention misses flocking to me as if I’d want such.”

A slight blush spread across her cheeks. “Isn’t that what all bachelors wish? To have misses and ladies falling for them, swooning when necessary, and caring for them when injured.”

“I don’t know about other bachelors, but I certainly do not.” He squeezed her hand. “There is only one miss that I wish would care for me.”

Diana glanced away but not before he noted the pain once again in her emerald eyes.

He’d caused that pain, unintentionally, and he needed to make it right. It no longer mattered that he may suffer, but she needed to know the truth.

Diana moved away. “You should wash your hand, Lord Somerton, to remove the blood.”

He’d not realized that there was blood on his fingers.

Diana damped another cloth and handed it to him.

When he was finished, she gave him a dry towel, then took another to wipe away the dampness from his face.

She was too close and smelled heavenly, of roses and sage. Further they were quite alone.

Without fully thinking through his actions, James slipped his hands about her waist and settled Diana upon his knee.

She gasped. “What are you doing?”

“Something I’ve wanted to do for a very long time.” Then he kissed her.

Diana pressed her palms against his chest and pulled back, but she didn’t attempt to rise from her position, which brought him the slightest amount of hope.

“What are you about?”

“I thought that was rather obvious.”

“Your need for kisses and caresses is well known to me, Lord Somerton. But why me and why now?”

“Because I’ve been told over and over that I’m being a fool and I finally decided to listen to that voice.”

She arched a brow. “I’m assuming that voice is Lady Isolda?”

“Yes, well,…and she’s correct.”

“You are rather foolish.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “And, you have not been?”

“We aren’t discussing me,” Diana reminded him.

But he'd like to. Instead, he decided that he'd need to be the first to concede. "I'm sorry."

"For what?

"For any pain I caused you in London. It was never my intention to hurt you." In fact, it hadn't been him, but friends or acquaintances discussing him, and he still didn't know what all she'd heard and was almost afraid to ask.

Diana stared down at James, her emerald eyes growing dark and not for the first time he wished he knew what she was thinking.

She caressed his cheek. "For what exactly are you apologizing?"

"That you learned of a future that I had set for myself long ago."

Diana started to rise, but he held fast to her waist.

"Did it ever occur to you that those plans were once made by a foolish young man?"

~

DIANA STILLED. "Yet, they'd not changed over the years," she said slowly.

"Are you so certain?"

Her pulse hitched and a small bit of hope broke through the carefully placed shield over her heart.

Did she trust him?

Somerton caressed her neck and gently pulled her forward. Diana didn't resist and soon her lips were on his again. At first, he was gentle, but her passion grew as he shifted and pulled her closer and traced the seam of her lips. Diana willingly opened for him. This is what she had missed, but when his lips were on hers, Diana lost all reason and that could not happen now.

"Diana, I heard Edward injured Somerto…"

She jerked away from James as Adam came into the parlor. Beside him were her two knights, grinning with triumph.

"What is the meaning of this?" Adam demanded as Diana jumped from Somerton's lap.

"A mistake," Diana quickly answered.

"No, Diana." Somerton rose. "This was not a mistake, nor was my courtship of you last spring."

She gaped at him. "That was not a courtship," she argued. "I thought it was, but after all those horrible things were said…" She stepped away. "I was a fool then and I'll not repeat the mistake." Which she'd nearly just done. If her brother hadn't walked in just now…she didn't want to think what might have occurred.

"What horrible things?"

She didn't dare repeat everything she'd heard, and she'd certainly

not speak the worst of it to *him*. But she could tell him some of it. "That your mother was pressuring you to marry and you picked me so that she'd stop bothering you, but you'd not changed your mind about waiting years before you married only to produce a child at the age of forty."

"I admit that for years I've made that claim, as I'm certain Lynwood can attest to that fact."

Diana looked at Adam, not that she needed any further confirmation, though her brother nodded in agreement.

"However, did it ever occur to you that I might have changed my mind?" He took a step toward her. "That my plan may have been altered one evening while I stood in the Bentley ballroom and a miss wearing a pale green, nearly white gown stepped through the entrance?"

She blinked at him. Somerton remembered what she had worn that night?

"That I was captivated by her beauty and that her curls shimmered with highlights of gold when bathed in candlelight."

Oh, he was a rogue with his honeyed words, but she'd not be moved.

"I knew that I needed to know your name and when I learned, and your age, wondered if I'd been blind during the earlier seasons for not having noticed you before."

Her cheeks warmed and she hated that Somerton viewed the evidence of her embarrassment.

"I did not court you to appease my mother. I courted you because I wanted to know you."

They did come to know one another very well. Almost too well.

"It wasn't until after our evening at Vauxhall that I finally admitted to myself that I was in love with you."

Diana nearly stumbled. He'd never once indicated that he loved her and after what she'd heard, she didn't think James possessed the ability to love.

"Why do you think I asked you to meet me in the gardens that night?" he asked.

Diana opened her mouth prepared to answer seduction but as Adam was standing there, she said nothing.

"I was going to ask you to be my wife." He glanced at Adam. "I know that I should have sought your permission first, but you were not in Town."

Adam just nodded as if not bothered.

"Instead, before I could even broach the subject, you slapped me, called me names and then left."

Her face burned and it was all she could do not to fan herself.

“Am I forgiven?”

Tears burned and she tried to blink them away, but it was not to be as a few slid out of the corner of her eye. He may love her but what he’d done with her mother she’d never be able to forget. She was just as certain that it would eat at her, especially when her mother visited.

“Diana?”

“I’m sorry that I let what others said about your intentions toward me cause such a reaction and for that I am sorry.”

He blew out a breath as if relieved.

“Shall I try this again.” James approached and took her hand in his. “I’ve not stopped loving you Diana. I tried, but it is not to be.” He cleared his throat. “With Lynwood’s permission, of course, would you consent to be my bride?”

She wanted to scream *yes*, but she couldn’t. “I’m sorry, Lord Somerton, but I heard more that evening.” Her face heated once again. “Dreadful things that I will *never* ever repeat and wish I could forget, and for those reasons, I fear I cannot agree to be your wife.” With that she yanked her hand from his and ran from the room. In fact, she ran all the way back to Hollybrook with the knights hounding her the entire way. But as much as they begged, she couldn’t tell them the truth any more than she could tell Somerton.

If only he had claimed what she heard were just rumors, she might have believed him. But, as Somerton admitted he had planned to remain a bachelor for so long, and he didn’t deny his mother’s intentions. The only thing the gentlemen had gotten wrong was the reason he courted her in the first place. However, as everything else was correct then she could only surmise that the most horrible thing she’d heard—the one that involved her mother—was true as well.

Chapter 12

WHAT THE BLAZES had just happened? What had he done that was so dreadful she could not speak of it?

James looked to Lynwood. “Do you know what she is talking about?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

James pushed his fingers through his hair and wandered back to the settee and fell onto it. “She’s maddening!”

“I’ve always believed so, but she is my sister, so there is that.” Lynwood took a seat across from James. “Were you serious about marrying her, of loving her, or did those words come about because I walked in to find my sister on your lap being kissed quite thoroughly.”

James groaned. Did nobody in the Vail family trust him? “I’d not lie about something so important.”

Lynwood simply nodded, leaned back and folded his arms across his chest and studied James. “You’ve no idea what Diana believes is too horrendous to overcome?”

“I’ve not the foggiest idea,” James admitted. “You’ve known me for years. Can you think of anything I might have done that she finds so offensive?”

“You’ve done nothing worse than most bachelors.” Lynwood frowned. “Actually, there are many who have done far worse, so I’ve no idea what Diana has gotten into her head now.”

James leaned forward. “Can you perhaps find out for me? I’ve no way of combatting what other rumor she heard without knowing what it is.”

“I’ll try my best,” Lynwood offered. “But don’t anticipate an answer.”

“Why?” Certainly, she’d tell her brother, wouldn’t she?

“I knew of your courtship of Diana in London. In fact, I received letters almost daily advising me of the progress.”

This took him aback. “Who wrote to you?” It couldn’t have been Diana’s mother. The woman never supervised her daughters. In fact, she carried on as if she had no children, so James couldn’t imagine who else might have taken an interest to inform the viscount.

“My wife’s brother,” Lynwood answered. “Redgrave.

Now that he thought about it, Viscount Redgrave was often about with his wife, and always near Diana and her sisters, but James hadn’t

given it much thought.

“Her mother was never a very good chaperone,” Lynwood explained.

That was common knowledge of anyone in London. The woman had always been far more interested in taking a lover to her bed than protecting and chaperoning her daughters during the Season.

“And as I couldn’t be present this spring, I found someone I could trust to watch over my sisters.”

“That still doesn’t explain why Diana won’t tell you my apparent sins.”

“Because when she returned from London, I asked about you and she forbade me, or anyone else, from ever speaking your name.”

James let his head fall back against the seat. “Blast it all.”

“Yes, well,” Lynwood stood. “I’ll still ask, but don’t hold out any hope that I’ll learn anything.”

“You must know what you did,” Lady Isolda insisted as she materialized after Lynwood had left.

“I honestly have no idea.”

The ghost frowned. “None?”

“None,” he yelled to make himself clear.

“Well, that’s a bother, isn’t it?” She pursed her lips and paced before him.

“Maybe her two knights can find out, then they can tell you so you can tell me.”

“Yes, of course, but she’s not said anything to those two as of yet.”

“Well, hopefully, they’ll pester Diana enough that she’ll answer if only to bring peace.”

“I hope you are correct because you’ve three days to make this right.”

Chapter 13

DIANA'S HEART ached for James, especially after he had confessed what he'd planned the night of the Hearne ball. A part of her wished that she'd not overheard what those men had said about James and her mother being lovers, but she had, and it wasn't something she could ever forget. For those reasons, Diana knew, in the end, it would strain their marriage and all because she couldn't tell him. Further, she feared that her mother would wish to renew their acquaintance even though James was married to her daughter.

Mother hadn't cared whether her lovers were married before so why should she care if he was a son-in-law?

And, even if James didn't succumb to Mother's charms, would he be tempted? Or would he compare mother to daughter, like that man suggested.

She knew James wasn't a saint and that gentlemen often had lovers before they married. When her oldest brother, Thomas, came down with the pox, her mother explained in detail how he'd come by the disease, as her mother had never sheltered her daughters. Further, she never even tried to hide the fact that she had affairs, one apparently being James, though her mother had never mentioned the names of any of those she took to her bed.

Diana knew that she'd never be able to forget what they'd done, and it was the very reason she had rejected Somerton's offer, shattering her own hopes and dreams in the process.

Her intention was to remain in her misery, in her set of rooms, for at least a sennight, or maybe forever, but Adam had forced her to attend the wedding of Lady Gwyn Hambly to Lord Locryn Pendarvis three days later.

It had been lovely, as most weddings were, though she'd never attended one within a garden before. Not only was every flowering plant in bloom, but ribbons had been strung from the trees. Though as lovely as the setting was, watching the bride and groom say their vows only made her heart ache all the more. Somerton had looked at her the way Lord Locryn Pendarvis looked at Lady Gwyn, with deep love and affection, and it was all Diana could do not to cry.

To further add to the strain, her knights had given her no peace. They demanded and begged to know what Somerton had done that was so unforgivable, but Diana refused to tell them. They then begged

her to forgive his transgression and admit her love so that they could all be free.

It was something else she could not do. Besides, it wasn't forgiveness that was needed, as he'd done nothing more than what any other gentleman in Society might do and Diana half wondered how many of the men who had attempted to court her before had also taken her mother to bed.

The very idea sickened her, so much so that she wondered if she might need to move to a part of the country, or world, where they'd never heard of her mother.

Following the wedding breakfast, at which Diana had remained close to her younger sisters, Adriana and Cordelia, in order to shield herself from Somerton, they'd returned to Hollybook Park to change and prepare for the ball to be held that evening.

She didn't want to go. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy dancing, it was because it hurt too much to see Somerton. So many times today he'd attempted to speak with her and Diana had nearly given him the cut direct. She wasn't certain she had the strength to put him off this evening.

As she prepared for the ball, Diana thought over her life and what had led her to this melancholy state. It wasn't just that she'd be denied James, or that she was denying herself his love, but it was all because of her mother.

They'd been close for the first thirteen years of her life, but then Diana's father had passed away before Edward had taken his first steps. It was during that time her mother had withdrawn from her children, often remaining in her set of rooms and bemoaning the fact that she must wear black and hating the fact that she must remain at Hollybrook Park. Until her father was gone, Diana hadn't realized how much her grandfather had disliked Diana's mother, which was nearly as much as he had disliked his son's first wife, who happened to be Adam's mother. Her mother and grandfather had only lived in peace for Diana's father. Once he was gone, there was no reason to hide the animosity they held for the other.

Further, Diana also learned that her grandfather barely tolerated his grandchildren, with the exception of Edward, for he didn't like having so many females underfoot. But, as Grandfather had been their guardian, there wasn't much he could do, and her mother resented the fact that she did not have any control. When her year of mourning had come to an end, her mother had left Hollybrook Park and hadn't returned for six years. She hadn't even sent for her daughters when they were old enough to attend a Season and it was Adam who finally took control and made certain Diana and Miranda finally enjoyed a Season. Diana was twenty and Miranda eighteen the first time they

visited London. Her grandfather had hoped that they'd find husbands quickly, which hadn't happened.

It was odd seeing Mother again after so many years. She saw them outfitted then had little to do with her daughters. It wasn't until the following year that she had returned to Hollybrook Park to take her children from Cornwall so that they weren't exposed to Thomas, who was ill by that time. Mother didn't take her children to London however, but to Northumberland and to the home of her brother, the Earl of Kenley. Thankfully, her Uncle Clifford Storm had seen that she and her sisters had two more Seasons. Then, this past fall, her mother had seen her children returned to Hollybrook Park following the death of Thomas and left for London as soon as their luggage was unloaded.

As the woman had little regard for her children, it wasn't any wonder that she'd seen nothing wrong with taking the gentleman courting her daughter as a lover.

The memories of her childhood and these past years flooded Diana as she truly acknowledged that she'd not really had a parent since the age of thirteen and few adults had taken an interest in Diana or her sisters during that time. It was a wonder they had turned out as well as they had and it was the very reason why she could not sacrifice her heart, and more importantly her future. If Somerton could claim to love her and still have an affair with her mother, what was to stop him from continuing such behavior after they married? Would he eventually tire of her and seek out the arms of another?

Diana wasn't certain she could bear it and knew in her heart of hearts that she'd always fear that she'd lose him once again to her mother.

Diana swiped the tears and blew out a shuddering sigh. She didn't wish to return to the castle but Adam and her sisters were waiting. Somehow, she would find the strength to get through this night and then she'd spend the rest of her summer crying over the blasted rogue.

"Where is Miranda?" she questioned as she gained the entry.

"She will not be joining us," Adam answered.

"If Miranda can remain at home, so shall I." She turned to make her way back up the stairs.

"The only reason Miranda is free of the obligation is because a dark ghost threatened her life this afternoon."

At his dire tone, a chill swept up her spine. "Are you being truthful?"

"I'd not lie of something so serious, especially after what Charlotte endured and how her life was nearly taken."

"Perhaps I should remain since Miranda must have suffered quite a fright." Her sister had been the one who had wished to encounter a ghost at Castle Keyvnor, and this was proof to be careful for what one

wished for.

"She's recovered and Charlotte is with her. You shall attend the ball with me and your sisters."

~

"SHE'S NOT MAKING THIS EASY," Lady Isolda grumbled.

James assumed she referred to Diana and he was in complete agreement. At the wedding, she'd taken a seat with family on either side of her. At the wedding breakfast, she'd done the same and whenever the guests were gathered, she kept her sisters near, as if she feared him. He hadn't even been given a chance to get close enough to greet her. The one time he did, she nearly gave him the cut direct so he turned and walked away.

"James, why aren't you dancing and enjoying yourself?" his mother demanded as she came upon him.

"I'm not in the mood, Mother."

"Is it that Vail girl?" She shook her head and tisked. "I thought you'd put her behind you. She's not for you dear."

"Mothers rarely know what's best for us," Lady Isolda grumbled. "Mine was insistent that I marry a certain baron, whose breath always smelled of garlic." The ghost cringed as she shuddered.

For the first time in days, James wanted to laugh, but his mother would misinterpret his reaction to her words and not one spoken by a ghost.

"I suppose it remains to be seen who is best for me, Mother, but I thank you for your concern." He'd learned the art of not arguing with her, thanking her, and never agreeing. Though over the years he'd been hard pressed many times not to tell her to leave him alone and let him conduct his own affairs. Doing so would earn him the opposite of a peaceful life.

Despite his mother's presence, James continued to watch the door for Diana's arrival. Instead, his oldest brother, Markham entered and when he saw who James was speaking with, pivoted and walked in the opposite direction.

"Coward," James muttered under his breath.

"What was that, Dear?" his mother asked.

With a smile, James nodded to Markham. "Your oldest has joined the ball."

At that, Mother pursed her lips and James had to wonder what his brother had done to earn her displeasure this time.

"Yes, well, if all of my children would heed my wishes as you, we'd all be happy."

She then flounced off making a direct line to her oldest son.

“You really aren’t going to listen to her, are you?” Panic laced Lady Isolda’s voice. “She is wrong. The only miss for you is Miss Vail.”

James chuckled. “I rarely listen to my mother,” James assured her. “I simply answer in a way to appease her.”

Lady Isolda let her shoulders drop as if relieved. “Thank goodness because it is imperative that you woo Miss Vail and that she admits she loves you or all is lost.”

“I promise that it’s my intention to do just that, but until I know what I’ve done, I’ve no way to defend myself.”

For two days, he’d gone over his time in London, what had occurred when they courted, even things he’d done before he’d ever met Diana and he could think of nothing that would cause her rejection of him, and it was damned frustrating.

“Her knights were unable to obtain an answer from her today. I hope they are able to do so before it’s too late,” Lady Isolda worried and turned to watch the door, right alongside James, both hoping she’d arrive. Both hoping that Diana would explain his sins. Both of their futures relied on learning this information.

Chapter 14

THE ONLY PEACE Diana had gotten was when Adam allowed her to return home to change into her gown for the ball, and since their return to the castle, she'd remained in the shadows while gaiety surrounded her. She'd even entered through the gardens and found a space behind the potted palms and watched Somerton as he watched the entry.

"Please, Fairest Diana, would you confess why you can't love him?" Sir Gilbert begged.

"It's the least you could do," Sir Orwen grumbled. "After tonight, you won't see us again and I, for one, would like to know what is so horrible that prevents us from being set free."

Diana blinked at Sir Orwen. "Where will you go after tonight, if you aren't freed?"

"We will still be here, but you will no longer see or hear us because we would have failed."

Diana pressed a hand against her breast. "I didn't know." The thought of no longer being pestered by them was disturbing. Yes, they got on her nerves, but she would miss them just the same

"You owe us." Sir Orwen glanced at the clock and frowned.

It was nearing nine. She didn't know when the deaths had happened, but as the sun slipped away, they'd become more despondent and depressed.

In fact, they weren't even bickering any longer, but simply resigned to repeat their fate.

Diana looked from one to the other. As she was the cause for them not moving on, perhaps they did deserve an explanation.

She gave a quick glance about the room, but there were too many people about. First, she certainly didn't want to be overheard. And second, others might think her mad if she appeared to be talking to herself even though she was behind the palms. "Not here."

"The gardens?" Sir Gilbert offered hopefully.

"Anywhere that we won't be overheard because the tale is not only humiliating, but painful, if you must know, and why I find it difficult to speak of," she whispered behind her fan so others wouldn't see her lips move.

"This way," Sir Orwen insisted and Diana followed him outside and further into the gardens until they came to a quiet corner.

Diana sank onto a bench. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t help you. I truly am.”

Sir Gilbert took her hand in his cold one, not that he could actually hold it, but the comforting gesture did fill her with warmth.

“Just tell us what has caused you so much pain.”

The tears welled and she went to swipe them from her eyes. Sir Orwen fished a handkerchief from his doublet and waved it before her. It was as ghostly as he and offered Diana no assistance in wiping the tears away. “I appreciate the offer. Thank you, Sir Orwen.”

He frowned and shoved the handkerchief back inside of his doublet.

“Dry your tears and tell us,” Sir Gilbert said kindly.

And she did, from the moment she’d heard James’ name come from the card room, his vow to remain a bachelor, and then, that he’d been her mother’s lover.

“He confessed he had changed his mind about being a bachelor. We were there,” Sir Orwen insisted.

“If that was all, we might now be betrothed, but he was my mother’s lover.”

The two knights stared at her as if they weren’t certain why she was upset.

“While he was courting me, he was bedding my mother. How can I marry him knowing what they’ve done? If it would have been anyone else, a mistress, stranger, whore, I might have been able to forgive if he swore to be true to me. But it was my *mother*.”

“I don’t believe Lord Somerton would ever be untrue to you,” Sir Orwen offered. “He loves you very much.”

“That won’t stop my mother from pursuing him if she so wished,” Diana sniffed. “Further, how do I know that he won’t compare me to her. What if I don’t make him happy? What if he wants her instead of me?” The tears flowed as she confessed all of her fears.

Sir Orwen frowned and Sir Gilbert did the best that he could to pat her on the shoulder.

“Now, now, perhaps if you explain,” Sir Gilbert offered.

She shook her head emphatically. “I can’t speak of it with him. It’s too humiliating. Besides, there is nothing he’d be able to say to ease my fears.”

“Can you at least give him the chance? For us?” Sir Gilbert begged.

“Perhaps you were mistaken. Gossips do not always have the facts correct,” Sir Orwen offered.

“They were right about everything else, except for his originally motivation in courting me, and I’m quite aware of the fact that my mother has taken several lovers over the years.”

“At least give him the opportunity to explain,” he implored. “Give

us that chance instead of dismissing out of hand, thus forcing us to endure this curse for another year."

She glanced from one to the other, her stomach clenching as her pulse hitched at the very idea of confronting Somerton with what he and her mother had done.

"Even if it doesn't free us, he does have a right to know why you can't be his," Sir Orwen insisted. "At least free him of the wondering as to what he did wrong. Tell him for us, if for nobody else."

Diana was torn. She wanted to go to James, but only because the ghosts asked it of her, and she could give them that even though she couldn't give them what they truly needed or wanted.

But could she do so for herself? How could she even begin such a conversation? Could she even speak of it without crying?

"He knows not what he did," Sir Orwen said. "At least give him peace from wondering and maybe he won't repeat the mistake in the future."

Not that she cared if he did or didn't. All Diana cared was that it had happened to her.

"Please, Diana," Sir Gilbert begged. "It is the last favor we will ever ask of you."

Oh, she truly hated this, and it might be the most difficult thing she'd ever have to do in her life, but she'd do this, and only for them. "Very well, for you, I will speak with him."

The two of them seemed to relax, but they had to understand that even after she spoke with James, it would change nothing.

"How much time before…."

"We've less than an hour now," Sir Gilbert answered.

"Then I'll go to him."

The two faded from her sight and Diana took a deep breath, dried her tears with the back of her hand and then made her way through the gardens and into the castle. This might be the most difficult conversation she'd ever have, but Somerton deserved the truth. Especially since he had confessed so much to her today.

~

LADY ISOLDA STRAIGHTENED AND TURNED, staring at the potted palms.

James did the same, wondering what had gotten her attention, only to note Diana slip away and exit into the gardens.

How long had she been there hiding? When had she even arrived? Her brother and sisters had made their entrance nearly thirty minutes ago and he'd assumed she'd be along later but feared she wouldn't return at all and began making plans to call on her tomorrow, though

it would be too late for Lady Isolda by then.

As soon as she made her way across the ballroom, she stepped out into the gardens, very much alone, though he was certain two ghosts accompanied her, and James followed.

However, though lanterns bathed the area with light, he did not see her anywhere.

Where had she gone? Had she returned to Hollybrook Park? Must he follow her there to convince her to explain what he'd done?

Slowly he searched the area and listened, hoping she was in conversations with her ghosts, but he neither saw nor heard anything. Diana had vanished as quickly as Lady Isolda had at times.

He'd just pivoted to return to the ballroom when Lady Isolda appeared before him and slapped him across the face, leaving an icy sting.

"What the blazes did I do now?" he demanded. It was the second time she'd struck him.

"You slept with her mother!" Lady Isolda accused with disgust.

"Whose mother?"

"Miss Vail's."

James frowned in confusion. "The dowager Viscountess Lynwood?"

"Yes."

James took a step back. "I've done no such thing."

"Well, Miss Diana believes you have."

"Who would start such a rumor?" James demanded.

"That I have no way of knowing but it's the reason she rejected you. She learned that apparently while you were courting her, you were bedding her mother."

James couldn't believe his ears. "I did no such thing. Further, the idea never crossed my mind."

Lady Isolda pursed her lips as if she didn't believe him.

"I swear. I never touched that woman!" Did Diana honestly believe he'd done so?

He pushed his fingers through his hair trying to figure out where she had come up with such an idea. He barely tolerated the dowager and rarely went near her, and he certainly would *never* bed her. The woman had taken half the men in London to her bed and James had no desire to end up with the same disease Diana's brother had died of.

"Tell me everything she said," James demanded.

"There was something to do with Lady Lynwood having a heightened interest in you, and a mention of a wager until one gentleman proclaimed, and I quote from Miss Vail, 'I'm afraid the time for that wager has already passed. I heard Lady Lynwood just the other day telling my mother over tea that Somerton was the best lover she'd ever had'. Diana fears that her mother will continue to pursue

you, or worse, that you'll compare the two of them, which was suggested by another, and she doesn't want to live her life always worried that you'd wish to be with her mother, or might return to her bed."

"I'd become celibate before I let *that* woman near me," James insisted and nearly shuddered. "Why in the blazes would the dowager voice such a falsehood?"

Lady Isolda simply shrugged.

Of course, she wouldn't know, but none of this made any sense. "I can assure you that I've never been that woman's lover."

"Why would she, or anyone else, make up such a story?" Lady Isolda demanded.

That is what he'd like to know as well.

Lady Isolda glanced at the clock. "You've not much time to make this right."

"Time?"

"Less than an hour. If you fail, I'm stuck here for another year, but you won't be seeing me again because I would have failed."

"I will try, but will she even believe me?" James stepped into the ballroom looking for answers, or someone who could assure Diana that James had never been her mother's lover.

How could she even think such of him? Not only was he insulted, but angry as well, but James set aside those emotions as time was of the essence for Lady Isolda.

Though, did he truly have a right to be angry with Diana? Nearly everything else she'd heard that night was true, and he'd admitted to those facts, so she probably assumed the rest was true as well. "Blast it all."

Then he spotted his mother. The woman hated Diana because she hated her mother. Was it possible…? Determination coursed through James as he strode across the ballroom.

"What are you doing?" Lady Isolda demanded as she followed.

"I simply need clarification, but if I am correct, I'll be able to tell Diana why she's mistaken."

"Just hurry," Lady Isolda called after him as he requested a private audience with his mother.

"Why do you dislike Miss Diana Vail?" he demanded once they were sequestered in a small parlor.

"It's not so much the chit, but her ghastly mother," his mother sniffed.

"Why, what did she ever do to you?"

"She needn't do anything. Her reputation is poor, barely better than a harlot and I'd not have you associated with that family."

James hated to ask this question, but he needed to know and given

his mother's hatred, suspected she knew as well. "Were her and father lovers?"

The blood drained from her cheeks.

"Were they?"

"I won't discuss this with you."

"Were they?" he demanded.

"Yes. They were lovers and for a short time he was quite in love with her. Thankfully it didn't last long, but our marriage was never the same afterwards."

Few marriages would be. "I'm sorry for what he did to you, but it isn't Diana's fault."

"She is still that woman's daughter. How do you know she won't turn out to be just like her?"

James gaped at his mother as anger surged. How dare she infer Diana was little more than a whore. "It would be wise to hold your tongue in the future because I intend on making Diana my wife."

She blinked at him, which James suspected was more due to his tone than his words for he'd never issued an order to his mother before. In truth, he avoided her whenever possible because she was so damned difficult and controlling.

"Don't be hasty. Marriage is so permanent."

"Only until a spouse is dead." She had married a duke and when he died, married an earl who happened to be James' father.

"That is uncalled for," she hissed.

"Miss Vail will be my wife. I've thought of little else since London. You will either make peace with my marriage, or don't bother to visit us." With that he strode from the room, detoured around the ballroom and then out into the gardens and called for Diana. Only silence greeted him.

"It is time," Lady Isolda whispered. "It was good to have known you, Lord Somerton." And before he could ask where Diana had gone, Lady Isolda disappeared. She didn't even give him a chance to say goodbye.

Panic rose as the ghosts were running out of time and he called for Diana again before returning to the ballroom. As soon as he spotted one of her younger sisters, he hurried over to her. "Have you seen your sister?"

Miss Cordelia blew out a heavy sigh. "She said something about trying to stop some ghosts from doing something foolish."

James' heart nearly stopped. If what Miss Cordelia said was true, then Diana was going to try and stop the knights from fighting.

What if she ended up like Lady Isolda? "Thank you," he said as he rushed from the castle and headed toward the cliffs. He had to get there before she was the one who did something foolish and got

herself killed.

Chapter 15

DIANA HATED that Sir Orwen and Sir Gilbert would have to relive their deaths and she wished she could save them, but when she'd searched for Somerton, he was not to be found.

Not that telling him the truth would have been easy, but she had promised the two, even though it would change nothing, and now it was too late.

Unless she could stop them somehow.

Just because she'd not found love didn't mean they couldn't be free. They'd tried for three hundred years so certainly the witches could pardon their grievance if she acknowledged her love for James to the ghosts. Certainly, that should be enough to free them all.

After telling Cordelia that she needed to save two ghosts from doing something foolish, she left the castle and ran to the cliffs.

As much as Sir Orwen and Sir Gilbert had irritated her, she did want this for them. Someone should be happy after what they had endured and as it wouldn't be her, it should be them.

Diana heard the steel of their blades before their forms were illuminated by the flash of lightning in the distance. The winds whipped around her, pushing Diana back, but she pressed on. She had to bring this curse to an end.

"Stop!" she cried when she drew near enough, but they acted as if they hadn't even heard her. "Sir Orwen. Sir Gilbert. Stop now!"

Still they continued in battle, their forms more human than ghost, sweat dripping from their brows as if they were alive.

"I love him," she cried. "Do you hear me? I love Lord Somerton. I have for a very long time so there is no need to continue fighting. You are free."

Yet they continued, as if she were the ghost and not them.

That's when she saw the woman, also calling to them, begging them to cease and promising to choose one. She must be Lady Isolda, the ghost who had been pestering James. But none of them appeared to be ghosts, not even their swords that clanged with each strike. They were as real as she and not one of them noticed her.

"Lady Isolda," Diana cried. "Listen to me. I'm in love. I love Somerton. He loves me. Stop this madness."

Why wasn't anyone listening to her? She was proclaiming the very thing they needed to hear but it changed nothing.

As panic rose that she'd not be able to stop their deaths, Diana circled and continued to try and gain their attention, yelling louder and louder until she was nearly screaming at them.

They shifted toward the edge of the cliff, as did Lady Isolda and Diana cried out a warning to her, just as her own foot slipped over the edge.

~

BY THE TIME James caught up to Diana, she was circling the two knights locked in battle, yelling at them, but he was still too far away to hear what she screamed at them. Further, they weren't ghosts at all and appeared very real, and at the edge of the cliff stood Lady Isolda, but none of them appeared to even notice Diana, who stood far too close to the edge.

She needed to move further inland and away from the fighting knights before harm came to her.

"Diana?" he called.

She didn't respond and James wasn't certain if it was because she was ignoring him, or she simply couldn't hear over the crash of the waves on the rocks below.

He rushed forward so that he could pull her to a safer place, as there was nothing either of them could do to stop what was unfolding before them. As he did, more thunder rumbled as lightning lit the sky and the wind pushed against him.

Diana took a step back and he fought against the wind to get to her.

When the lightning flashed again, she was gone.

Heart in his throat, James ran to the edge of the cliff and fell to his knees, afraid that he'd find her crumpled on the rocks below, just as Lady Isolda had died.

Instead, she held tight to rocks in a crevice just within his reach, not that his panic lessened, as he still needed to bring her to safety. James reached for her. "Take my hand, Diana."

She glanced up at him. Terror filled her emerald eyes and he never wanted to see that fear in them again. He had to save her.

"I can't," she cried.

"I will not let you fall."

She looked to his hand, then into his eyes. "I'm too afraid to let go."

Her situation was precarious, but if she didn't reach for him, soon she'd slip and he'd lose her forever. "I am too but trust me. I will not let you fall."

"What if you miss or can't hold on?"

As she said the words, her right hand began to slip from the crevice, and he feared she'd lose her grip before she reached out to him. It wasn't as if she had anything substantial to hold on to, only a flat surface carved out of the stone, which was becoming wet from the splash of the sea against the rocks.

"You must trust me, Diana. I will not let you fall." And he prayed that he could grab her hand, hold on and pull her to safety.

At his words, her right hand lost its grip, and she reached up to grasp again before both hands slipped and she fell to her death.

"Trust in me Diana. I will not let you fall."

Her left hand started to slip.

"Do not leave me," he ordered. "I love you too much to let you die. I don't care that you loathe me, but I love you. I need you."

Tears spilled from her cheeks.

"Blast it all! Take my hand before you fall."

Before he could finish the words, her left hand slipped just as she brought her right arm up. He stretched out as far as he dared and grasped her right forearm before it was too late. She tightened her hold on his arm as James braced himself so that he didn't tumble forward and then he lifted Diana, who now clung to him with both hands. The muscles in his shoulder and arm burned, but he continued to lift until he was finally able to pull most of her body up and over the edge, then he moved back, taking her with him until they were both far enough away that they no longer risked falling.

James collapsed to his knees, breathing hard and Diana threw her arms about him and sobbed into this neck.

He drew her close and held tight, whispering his love in her ear, giving what comfort he could, but the panic had not yet left his body either.

After a moment she drew back, her cheeks wet with tears. "Thank you." She burst into tears again. "I don't know what I would have done…I would have died without you."

"I wouldn't have wanted to continue to live if I'd failed. If I had lost you," he confessed.

She placed a hand on his cheek. "Do you love me so very much?" she asked as if she wasn't certain she could believe him.

James turned his face and kissed her palm. "I love you more than life itself. I only wish that you could love me."

Her tears welled again, and his heart sank as he anticipated her rejection.

"But I do, James Bryant, Earl of Somerton. I do love you. I loved you in London and as hard as I try not to love you, I still do."

Instead of shouting in triumph, which was his first instinct, James pulled Diana close and kissed her deeply. She was now his and he was

never going to let her go.

Chapter 16

"A POX ON YOU SIR ORWEN," Sir Gilbert cried out. "I always knew you'd win."

Diana jerked away from James to see Sir Gilbert crumple to the ground, a hand over his heart. Lady Isolda rushed forward and cradled the knight's head in her lap. "Oh, Sir Gilbert, I'm sorry that it came to this."

"One kiss from your sweet lips and I can leave this place in peace."

Lady Isolda bent forward, her blonde hair cascading about them as her lips touched his.

Sir Orwen sank to his knees. "I'm sorry, my friend. I hadn't meant death for you."

"Yet, death is the gift you gave. Care for her or I'll haunt you the rest of my days." With that he gave his last breath.

Before their eyes, Sir Gilbert stepped from his body as it disappeared and Lady Isolda and Sir Orwen turned to ghosts once again.

The three turned to Diana and James. Sir Gilbert executed a deep bow, flourishing his hat, the red feather brushing the ground. Lady Isolda placed a hand over her heart, tears shimmering in her eyes, then blew a kiss of thank you. And Sir Orwen smiled. The first that Diana had ever seen upon his face and bowed as well.

"They are free," Diana whispered.

As their forms began to fade, Sir Orwen turned to Sir Gilbert. "If you thought I would win in the end, why didn't you just concede and save us all?"

"I did not truly believe you would. I simply wished to grant you a boon in the end."

"It matters not. I still beat you and won the hand of Lady Isolda," Sir Orwen argued.

"She's not agreed, but I did gain a kiss," Sir Gilbert laughed.

"I've suffered the presence of both of you these last three centuries and I have no intention of enduring either of you for all of eternity," Lady Isolda announced, though her voice grew faint and soon, Diana could no longer hear the three of them bickering.

"They are free," James finally said.

"Yes, they are." And Diana was happy for them.

Now that the crisis had passed, the ghosts were gone and Diana's

pulse had calmed, she'd realized that in her relief, she'd confessed her heart to James. It was what had finally freed the ghosts. But it still didn't change any of her fears.

"It wasn't me."

~

JAMES KNEW the moment he spoke the words that Diana would pull away from him, but it was a discussion they must have if they were to have any kind of future.

"What wasn't you?"

"It wasn't me with your mother. It was my father."

She blinked. "How did you…they weren't supposed to speak of it. At least, I thought they'd hold my confidence."

"They did." He took her hands in his. "Lady Isolda was listening and told me."

Diana looked away and even though it was dark, enough moonlight reflected off the ocean that he could see the stain of a blush upon her cheeks.

Moonlight? James glanced to the sky. The storm was gone completely and there was barely a cloud in the sky. Had it gone with the ghosts?

He shook his head. It no longer mattered. What did matter was before him.

"Lady Isolda confronted me and as I knew I'd barely ever spoken to your mother, let alone anything else, I asked my mother and she confirmed that your mother and my father had been lovers at one time."

She simply stared at him, suspicion still in her eyes.

"I swear to you Diana. It was never me."

"But the man was so certain of what he'd heard," she insisted. "And, unfortunately, I'm all too aware of my mother's reputation."

James winced. "If you don't believe me, ask her. Ask your mother which Lord Somerton had been her lover."

Diana pulled back and stared at him, then frowned. "I wish I had, when we were still in London."

"Would she have told you?" James asked in shock.

Diana snorted. "Mother made no secret of her lovers, and never even attempted to keep the information from me. If asked, I'm certain she would have provided names."

That information was not something to be shared with an innocent miss. "Then if you asked, she'd tell you."

"Yes, she would."

At least Diana would now know the truth, though he wished she'd

simply trust him.

She studied him, her emerald eyes lightening. “But I don’t believe I will.”

“You’d have proof that it wasn’t me,” he reminded her.

“I’ve all the proof I need.” She leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

“You do?” James asked in surprise. He thought for certain that Diana would want clarification, as this was the one matter that had kept her from him.

“If you knew my mother at all, you’d know she’d tell me the truth. As I don’t wish to hear about your father’s skills in the bedchamber, I shan’t be asking her.”

“Certainly, she wouldn’t say such things to you?” James questioned as further shock took over. “Such matters are not discussed with an innocent miss.”

Diana laughed. “My mother has never sheltered her daughters and she’s been quite forthright in her explanations and delight when discussing intimacies shared between a man and a woman.”

Diana’s face grew redder with her words and James’ body heated.

“The only information my sisters and I lack in such an education is experience,” she shrugged.

Desire coursed through him and James pulled Diana close. “If it’s experience you seek, I’d be happy to oblige.” Then he pulled her down onto him as he fell back and then rolled until she was pinned beneath him.

“You shan’t ruin me, James Bryant. I shall not anticipate the vows with a rake such as you.”

She may have laughed, but James was still uncertain what to make of her words. “Do you not want to marry me?” After all this time, everything they’d shared, the honesty between them, was she about to rip out his heart again.

Diana sobered. “Yes, I wish to marry you.” Then she frowned, her eyes clouded with worry. “Have you changed your mind about me. You haven’t asked and I shouldn’t assume.” Her eyes grew wide. “Was I too difficult?”

Before she could ask another question, he took her lips with his. Passion ignited and he drank from her and she him, and James hoped that was all the answer she needed. However, when she pushed at his chest, he lifted his lips from hers.

“Have you?” She demanded.

“Oh Diana, I’ve wanted to marry you for months and I’m quite certain that there is nothing you can ever say or do to change my mind.”

She pushed harder at him. “In that case, shouldn’t we return to the ball so that you might seek my brother’s permission.”

“He already gave it.” James didn’t rise from her. “I much prefer where we are and to continue what we are doing.”

“Of course you do, but I shan’t risk my reputation.”

James let out a heavy sigh and finally rolled away and helped Diana to her feet. “I truly hope you don’t wish for a long betrothal.”

She laughed as he took her hand. “Not too long, I suppose. Though, I can’t get married until Charlotte has her baby and is allowed into public again.”

James groaned. That baby wasn’t even due to arrive for another month, at least.

“Then there is the planning for such an event, so I’m not certain when we can wed.”

“By special license in the privacy of your home.” He didn’t care if Lynwood’s wife was giving birth as they were saying their vows. He’d not wait any longer than necessary to make Diana his.

“I suppose that is possible,” she agreed.

“Or, perhaps a trip to Gretna Green,” he offered hopefully. “It won’t take long to pack and have the carriage readied.”

When Diana didn’t readily agree, his heart sank. How long would she put him off?

“I do wish to marry quickly, however, I won’t do anything that might cause others to question my reputation or a need to rush the vows,” she explained. “I’ve three younger sisters, and we already suffer enough because of the way Mother carries on. I’d not ruin their chances at a good marriage if Society not only judges them on Mother’s behavior, but mine as well.”

As he was well aware of Lady Lynwood’s reputation, and how cruel Society could be, he understood the need to wait and to plan a proper wedding with banns being cried and whatever else was required so that there was no reason for anyone to gossip. James didn’t like it, but he understood.

“Very well.” He lifted her hand and placed a kiss upon her wrist. “But please, don’t make me wait forever.”

Diana laughed. “I promise not to do so.” Then she leaned in and kissed him. “Besides, I’ve always longed for a late September wedding amongst the autumnal foliage.”

“September?” He groaned. That was months away.

“September!” she declared. “Surrounded by family and friends.”

“I still prefer Gretna,” he grumbled.

“You prefer to be bedded, Lord Somerton,” Diana laughed. “And you shall be…in September.”

~

TRUE TO DIANA'S WORDS, James was indeed bedded in September just as the leaves of the trees began to change from green to red, orange and gold.

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EXCERPT
THE GHOST & MISS MIRANDA
Available March, 2021

Castle Keyvnor, Cornwall, June 1812

"It must have been the pixies," a woman sitting behind him whispered. "There is no other explanation for such beauty."

Pixies! Wesley Claxton, Marquess Epworth snorted to himself and tore his gaze away from Miss Miranda Vail long enough to examine the gardens of Castle Keyvnor. It seemed as if every flower was in full bloom, including plants that shouldn't even be flowering this time of year. Numerous ribbons of every color imaginable hung from the trees, fluttering in the breeze. It was a magical sight, he supposed, but pixies had nothing to do with how it came about. More likely talented gardeners, who had months to prepare, had created the *magical,* albeit strange, setting for a wedding.

Wesley was quite done with this corner of Cornwall. He couldn't go anywhere without overhearing superstitious talk about witches in Bocka Morrow, pixies in the gardens, a fortune-telling gypsy at the neighboring estate, or mermaids at the seashore. He'd lived along the coast his entire life and had never heard such rubbish.

It simply wasn't logical and there was no scientific knowledge to support the existence of magical properties, or the afterlife in a spirited form.

Despite his disagreements with Miss Miranda Vail on all things magical, at least she was no longer obsessed with the notion of ghosts. When they'd been introduced during her first season, she'd seemed more interested in learning about the supposed ghost that haunted the Mayfair mansion than the ball occurring about them and he'd been quick to dismiss her as a feather-brained, odd miss.

However, his opinion had drastically changed over time, and after coming to know her, Wesley found Miranda utterly delightful. For the past three seasons they'd spent hours together and he often called on Miranda and they took drives through Hyde Park, attended the theatre and danced at balls, but she gave him no indication that she thought of him as anything more than a friend. In fact, they'd become the best of friends and confidants. And, had she flirted with him even once,

Wesley would have been encouraged to pursue more. Unfortunately, Miranda had offered no such encouragement, much to his disappointment.

As he followed the other guests back to the castle after the ceremony, Wesley made plans for how he'd spend time with Miranda later today, and dance with her this evening, and when he would *finally* kiss her, only to pause when he noted a path through the trees. He'd walked this area several times over the past week, usually with Miranda, and he was certain he'd not seen it before.

It wasn't a well-used path by any means, but it was a path nonetheless and curiosity had him following to see where it led until he finally came to a stop in a small clearing.

"Are you following me, Lord Epworth?" Miranda inquired with a tilt of her chin. Her head was angled such that her dark curls brushed against her shoulder.

"I wasn't." Wesley had no idea she'd be here, as the last he'd seen of Miranda she and her sisters had their heads together and were whispering as they left the wedding. However, he was far from disappointed in finding her in the clearing. "I simply followed this path to see where it led. Why are you here?"

"Supposedly this is one of the most enchanting places in all of Castle Keyvnor." Miranda grinned and spread her arms wide and did a turn.

Enchanting, magical…weren't they the same thing? "What makes it so?" Just because they argued about the existence of magic and he did tease her, there was nothing malicious in his tone or words. They simply held opposite opinions. His was logical and hers was fanciful. It was quite endearing and one of the things he loved about her. Miranda had the ability to imagine, whereas as much as he tried, Wesley simply couldn't accept what could not be proven.

She pursed her lips and Wesley couldn't help but admire everything about her, from her mahogany curls to her lavender slippers and everything in between, including her determined grey eyes and full coral lips. She was doubly lovely and desirable at moments such as this when the color was high in her cheeks. Yet, she didn't answer his question.

Wesley glanced about, noting that they were completely alone in an intimate setting, surrounded by trees, shrubbery and numerous wildflowers and he considered the dangers. Not that he or Miss Miranda could be harmed of course, but if anyone came upon them...

No, that was an excuse he made to himself. In truth, he'd tried to avoid being alone with her because all he'd wanted to do was kiss her but feared one kiss would never be enough and as he fell deeper, she'd reject his suit.

When had he lost confidence in pursuit of a woman? He wasn't exactly an innocent lad, and had had lovers in the past, as well as mistresses…except he had not loved any of those women. He only loved Miranda and feared losing her. He'd gone so far to convince himself that he'd rather have her as a friend than not have her at all. Except, he also could no longer live with always wanting and loving her while only being friends. He needed so much more, and it was time to find out if that were even possible. Which he'd do tonight.

"Why are you really here?" he asked.

She glanced back at him, her eyes narrowing.

"I don't believe I shall tell you because I'm certain you will laugh." She sniffed and walked closer to the well.

Wesley placed a hand over his heart. "I promise that I will not. On that you have my word." And he certainly hoped he wasn't making a promise that he could not keep. Life with Miranda would be wonderful and whimsical as she searched for magic and what lay beyond her imagination, while he remained grounded in reality. However, she needed to accept his suit before that could happen, and Wesley still feared that she would only accept him as a friend.

~

AS MUCH AS Miranda wished to spend as much time as possible with Lord Epworth, she didn't dare tell him the truth as to why she'd come to this clearing.

After Miranda had learned that his opinion of her had been that of a feather-brained, odd miss, she'd tamped down her utter fascination for ghosts. She never denied that she believed in ghosts, because she did, whole-heartedly, and the two of them had argued over the existence of anything magical or other-worldly several times. However, their disagreements weren't so strong as to alter their friendship. However, if he knew why she was truly in this clearing, by this well, he might begin thinking her feather-brained again and Miranda feared losing his friendship.

Friendship! That's all she was to Epworth, a friend.

Oh, why couldn't he see her as anything more? As far as Miranda was concerned, Epworth was nearly perfect with his blond hair and blue eyes, sculptured features and just the perfect height of being a head taller than her. Further, he was kind and an enjoyable companion, someone she nearly trusted completely.

Epworth was perfect. Perfect for her and he was her *friend.*

Though she continued to be careful not to let Epworth know how badly she wished to encounter a ghost, it was impossible to ignore the opportunity to do so at Castle Keyvnor and the very reason she'd

snuck away from everyone following the wedding. If rumors were to be believed, the castle was brimming with ghosts and it had been her intention to find one—just one—during the week of wedding festivities, but so far, they'd been elusive.

As elusive as Epworth's love.

"Are you going to tell me?" he asked, a blond eyebrow hitched as he waited for her answer. "Why is it so *magical?"*

"The well." Her cheeks grew hotter as she gestured to the weathered bricks, but she'd not shy away from what she believed.

At that he frowned and pointed. "That well?"

"Yes, *this* well." She neared the crumbling structure, which she suspected remained standing only because of the vining flowers that grew about it, like string holding together the broken pieces.

"Is this a special well?"

"If you must know, it's a wishing well." Miranda made light of the rumor so he didn't suspect that she believed with all her heart that any wish could be granted.

Epworth bit his bottom lip as if he were trying to contain his reaction, as he promised.

"It holds a water nymph and if an offering is made, wishes will be granted," she confided in a teasing whisper, though her heart beat a rapid tattoo of hope that it could provide one of her fondest wishes.

Epworth dipped his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Ghosts, pixies, mermaids and now water nymphs. None of it logical," he mumbled more to himself before he lifted his chin to look at Miranda. "Did you bring a coin?" he finally asked.

"You don't throw coins into this well." Miranda pulled a ribbon from her hair.

"I don't understand." Epworth stepped forward. "Then what do you wish with?"

"The nymph, nor the well, has any use for money," she answered with authority. "I'm offering a favorite ribbon that I wore today specifically for this purpose. The nymph may offer it to the pixies or keep it for herself."

"Pixies?"

"Yes, pixies, the same ones who decorated for the wedding."

"I thought those were gardeners."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "Even the best gardeners in all of England could not have created such beauty." They'd argued these points several times and no matter what she believed in her heart, Epworth found the possibility illogical.

"If you insist."

Blast! He was humoring her again and she'd not have it. Oh, why couldn't Epworth just once entertain the possibility that magic existed

and not everything needed to be *logical*.

One of the many things Miranda admired about Epworth was his intelligence. If he wasn't the heir to a dukedom, he would spend his days perhaps as a fellow or professor surrounded by books and taking in lectures at the Royal Society of London. At least, that is what he'd shared with her when they had discussed what they'd want if given a choice in life. But other than attending the Season, Epworth was unable to spend as much time in London as he wished since he was required to be at Forester Hall, preparing for a life already chosen for him.

"It must be horrible for you," Miranda said after a bit of thought.

He frowned as his eyebrows formed a V between those warm blue eyes.

"Not to see magic. Simply to accept that the world is as you see it, and what has been proven and disproven simply because a scholar has claimed it to be so."

"I prefer to live in reality, not fantasy."

Miranda pursed her lips and studied his handsome face. No matter how much they'd argued the possibilities, she could never understand how Epworth could be so blind to what was obvious to others. "Even after a week at the castle, you've not seen, heard or felt a ghost?" She'd been certain that in time, he'd experience *something* even though the ghosts were too stubborn to appear to her.

"Others insist they have. Of course, it's the power of influence. Such as a chill in a room when it has nothing to do with an entity but the fact that it's an ancient castle, made of stone."

Of course, that was the *logical* answer. Miranda sighed with disappointment. Not only for him, but herself as well. Perhaps he was correct, but she'd heard so many stories. And Uncle Jonathan assured her that the castle was bursting with ghosts. Had he only been telling her tales?

"I'll be honest," she finally said. "I was hoping to encounter one ghost this week, but apparently it is not to be."

"And you are here to wish for one?" A teasing light danced in his eyes.

At least he wasn't laughing at her. They may disagree, but at least he accepted her, and it was one of the reasons that she loved him.

Miranda lifted her chin. "Yes, I am. I wish to prove to you that they are real."

"I eagerly await to be proven wrong." Epworth gave a slight bow.

"Very well." Miranda held the lavender ribbon above the well. "I wish to encounter one ghost." Then she let it drop into the abyss and dusted her hands as if it were done.

As much as she hoped for an encounter, Miranda wasn't confident

that the well could provide what she wished. But she'd rather live in a world of magical possibilities than like Epworth, who only believed what he could see.

Epworth stood still and glanced around, as did she.

Nothing.

Oh well, it was certainly worth the chance, though she'd given up a favorite ribbon for nothing.

"I'm sorry that you didn't have the encounter that you wished," Epworth said with sincerity.

"It was silly to hope." She'd just need to be content with the one ghost she'd seen, even though it hadn't occurred at Castle Keyvnor.

Maybe one day Epworth would believe, but the fact that he didn't wasn't cause enough to dismiss him entirely. After all, the world was full of things that couldn't be explained, and if it hadn't been for Uncle Jonathan, perhaps she wouldn't believe in ghosts either, despite claims from her own family. After all, she *was* a reasonable adult.

"Shall we return to the others?" Epworth offered his arm.

Even if he didn't believe, he could at least kiss her, but he hadn't even attempted to once in all the time that they'd known one another. Maybe she should have wished for that instead.

Just as Miranda was giving up on the two things she'd hoped for since the beginning of the week, something pushed her to the side. As she caught herself on the edge of the well, the bricks began to collapse, and she started falling forward. A scream ripped from her being as she began to plunge into the dark void right before a strong arm wrapped about her middle, pulling her back from a certain death.

Miranda gasped, her heart pounding as Epworth pulled her into his arms.

It wasn't proper, but she didn't care. She held tight, her arms about him and her head against his chest.

As his hands smoothed up and down her back, Miranda began to relax.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, I think so."

"That was quite a stumble. I'm glad that I was here to catch you."

Except, it wasn't a stumble. She was pushed and quite forcefully, yet nobody else was here.

A chill skittered down her spine and Miranda shivered. She'd gotten her encounter with a ghost and it had *not* been a pleasant experience.

She tilted her head back to explain, but Epworth's blue eyes were darkened with concern, studying her.

Oh, she could tell him, but he'd never believe her and truthfully, Miranda would like to just enjoy finally being in his arms.

He lifted a hand and tucked an errant curl behind her ear, then lowered his mouth to hers and before she could comprehend his actions, he was kissing her.

All fears fled.

Epworth was *finally* kissing her, and it was the most wonderful thing in the world. Maybe, just maybe, he did see her as more than a friend.

As he deepened the kiss, she clung tighter, tilting her head as she engaged him further. Goodness it was warm, and she experienced the most delightful sensations swirling about in her belly.

"Miranda, where have you gone off to?"

At someone calling, Epworth jerked away. "Forgive me."

"For what?" she asked when she realized that he'd stepped away and a sudden chill swept over her.

"I shouldn't have taken advantage."

"I believe I allowed you to do so."

"Miranda, where are you?"

That was her brother, Adam, and he sounded irritated. "I must go."

She took a step away, but Epworth reached out and grasped her hand. "Will I see you at the ball tonight?"

Her stomach flipped with excitement. "Yes."

"Save a waltz for me."

"It would be my pleasure." Miranda couldn't help but grin as giddiness danced within her being as she ran off, hurrying down the foliage-lined path only to be brought up short by dark smoke that materialized into the most gruesome creature with black eyes. He wore charred peasant clothing from days of old and his skin appeared scorched.

Miranda stumbled back.

"Who are you?"

"A wish answered," he sneered.

Her heart skipped, shocked that it had been granted. However, when she'd made the wish, she hadn't anticipated the entity to be so frightening.

"Leave here!"

"I am." Miranda grasped her throat in fear and glanced about. Epworth hadn't followed and she was quite alone with this terrifying entity.

"If you step foot on Keyvnor land again, it will be the end of you."

Miranda gulped. "I promise. I'll leave right away."

"And *never* return! Or you will die." The peasant dissipated, leaving but a trace of smoke and the most unpleasant odor of burned…she didn't even know how to describe the stench, but it made her nearly gag. Covering her mouth and nose, Miranda ran the rest of

the way to find Adam waiting for her. As soon as she explained what had occurred, he grasped her arm.

"You're leaving this instant," Adam ordered.

Numbly she nodded, her heart beating heavily in her chest as she glanced back to where she'd come, but Epworth was nowhere to be seen. As much as she'd like to return to him, to the safety of his arms, Miranda knew that he'd never believe her and further, ignoring the entity's orders would see her killed. Of that, she had no doubt.

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About Jane

Jane Charles is a USA Today Bestselling author who has lived in the Midwest her entire life. As a child she would more likely be found outside with a baseball than a book in her hand. In fact, Jane hated reading until she was sixteen. Out of boredom on a long road trip she borrowed her older sister's historical romance and fell in love with reading. She long ago lost count of how many novels she has read over the years and her love for them never died. Along with romance she has a passion for history and the two soon combined when she penned her first historical romance. What turned into a hobby became a passion. In addition to historical romances, she has been pulled to write contemporary romances and intends to continue writing both historical and contemporary.

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